



“LEAVES OF HOPE” FOR BELARUSIAN CHILDREN  
REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 1077872

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

2 December 2009

### Chair's Report

This report will be very brief! The year has been one of consolidation for the fostering/ prevention/ and befriending projects. We have continued to fund the salaries of the two project workers based in BelAPDliMI and they have continued to submit quarterly reports on their activity.

The principal objectives - to prevent the abandonment of babies especially those with disabilities - has continued and there are some lovely case stories of the imaginative ways in which the project workers have been able to help. They have used a local women's church-based group to provide a 'social granny' so that Mum could continue working; they have arranged for one very young mother to live with a foster carer for three months to help learn how to care for her baby and to provide time for alternative accommodation arrangements to be made; they have linked families with sources of specialist help, advice and information; and have continued to respond to requests for help from families with whom they have early contact and who have returned some months or years later for additional support.

Fathers are becoming increasingly involved in the plans for the care of their "special children" and the project workers continue to emphasise the importance of involving them and the wider family wherever possible. Doctors in the hospitals are now working more closely with the project workers and more readily referring to community rehabilitation and development centres for specialist help and treatment. They have recognised the importance of providing information and practical help for families for whom the birth of disabled child can be such a trauma and certainly in the original target hospital almost always now routinely refer to the project workers whether or not there is the risk of abandonment.

The progress is now not limited to Minsk. Word of mouth and national publicity has resulted in a number of requests from other parts of Belarus for information and advice. the Belarusian press and television have continued to take a keen interest in our work and a number of programmes and feature articles have been published.

Strategically, the project workers and Elena Titova (who is now the President/ Chairperson of BelAPDliMI) have continued to lobby the Ministries for changes to laws and regulations to improve facilities and attitudes towards children with disabilities. They work with partner agencies (social pedagogical centres, SOS Kinderdorf, The Children's Hospice etc), to raise awareness and to collaborate over proposals for developments of better services, and a strengthened legal status for them.

Seminars are held in academic institutions to ensure that as social pedagogues and psychologists are being trained they are aware of the needs of families of

children with disabilities. The project workers are also much in demand at national conferences where they take the opportunity to promote ideas and provide supporting literature.

The rate of abandonment at birth in our target hospitals has now fallen to nil while overall in the country it has reduced further from about 300 in 2006/07 to less than 100. This has to be treated with some caution as it is always difficult obtaining accurate statistical data. Different Ministries collect it in different ways. Organisations with whom we work closely such as the National Adoption Society keep a close eye on trends and collect definitive data are clear that the situation is definitely improving. They do point out however, that that the Presidential decree in 2007 requiring parents to pay for their children cared for by the State will almost certainly have had an effect on trends.

We have not done any training this year. Although the team remain keen to be involved we felt the priority for our funds was in the salaries of the project workers. We have though now just received a grant of £5,000 from an anonymous donor to undertake two courses early next year. BelAPDIIMI has requested that this should be targeted on "Professionals and foster carers working together for children with disabilities". Plans are being prepared for March next year.

Our hopes last year to build on Val's work in Zhodino to extend befriending for children in Orphanages who have no contact with their families regrettably has not materialised. We wrote a good project proposal but without the financial capacity to underpin the initiative with sound theoretical concepts through training and awareness raising we could not proceed. While we might have considered befriending to be a priority, to be successful, our partners had to share that view. While they agreed it was important, their priorities were to embed our previous work and to make sure it was robust and fully sustainable. We might have been convinced about that 2 years ago (!) but they remained cautious. We had to listen to them. I hope this report demonstrates we did so and that there is now no doubt at all about the robustness of our efforts.

The money for the Prevention and Befriending Projects will run out in July 2010. thereafter as your Chair I will be offering my services as 'Granny Consultant' doing whatever needs to be done to promote the well being of children in Belarus and in supporting Val in her continuing invaluable work with them and the youngsters of South Wales .

I end as always by saying an enormous thank you to everyone. There are too many people to name individually, but to everyone who helps us raise money, who gives their time freely, who continue to support us and work for us, our wonderful trainers and sponsoring organisations, our tireless Trustees, our trainers, our co-ordinators in Minsk – Valentina and Luda, and of course a very, very special thanks to Val without whom none of this would have happened.

Thank you everyone

Margaret Bamford

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