

# FOCC - Edinburgh West

## 2011 Visit to Belarus (9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> March) Diary

Heidi Grant, Anne Evans, Ian & Janice Smith (7 days), and Val Blair, Tracey Shields & Dougie McIntosh (4 days)

**Wed 9<sup>th</sup>** – Having travelled down from Edinburgh to Gatwick the previous day, we (the 7 of us from



Edinburgh West) met up with the other FOCC Groups (21 travellers from 9 groups) & travelled from Gatwick to **Minsk Airport** (fantastic 70's architecture), & from Minsk (twinned with Nottingham no less) to Mogilev by bus. Belarus is largely a flat country with long straight roads which ploughed through snow covered arable and largely pine & birch forested country, broken up by occasional small and scattered village settlements. First impressions of the people were not so positive with a pretty intimidating reception from Customs (Belarussians have a way of looking at you and making

you feel like you're in the wrong, which of course the Customs people have down to a fine art) followed by the lady at the currency exchange kiosk shutting up for a half hour break in spite of a queue of 8 people.

Mogilev itself was the first major settlement encountered in the 3 hour drive from the airport. It is not unlike the east end of Glasgow or Wester Hailes in that you are presented with row upon row of fairly bleak looking **domestic housing blocks**, each around 7-9 stories high. Somewhat bizarrely the monotony of these structures was broken up by small settlements of single storey wooden houses (as we'd seen in the countryside).

Arriving at our own Mogilev apartments around 8.00pm we were met by our children and their families (a lovely surprise). We shared a late supper with our families, and after organising our next meetings with them, said our goodnights. The rest of the evening was spent preparing food bags for delivery over the following day's home visits.



We found out that Val's wee girl Tanya was in hospital with stomach problems as we travelled to Belarus.

**Thu 10<sup>th</sup>** – All 7 of us met up for breakfast at 8.30am in the small bar/cafe on the ground floor of **the apartments** (soc (juice), blini (pancakes), chai (tea)) and then went shopping to the new supermarket for fruit, biscuits, pasta & rice for

the food bags, and to change money. The money is scary as 100,000 roubles is about £25, and is always in notes. Still it was nice to be a multi-millionaire at last. On the way over, Dougie had been delighted that Anya had left him 20 roubles last summer, that was until he worked out it was worth about 1/2p!



After returning from the supermarket and finishing the making up of the food bags for delivery to our families, Dougie, Tracey, Janice and I made our first home visit to **Zhenya** (with Kostya our interpreter - who was over with our Edinburgh West group last year).

*Home visits – each home visit included dropping off a food bag, a little money (when appropriate), passing on messages from their Scottish families, and lots of*

*questions to find out how the child is doing both in terms of health, and at school and at home.*

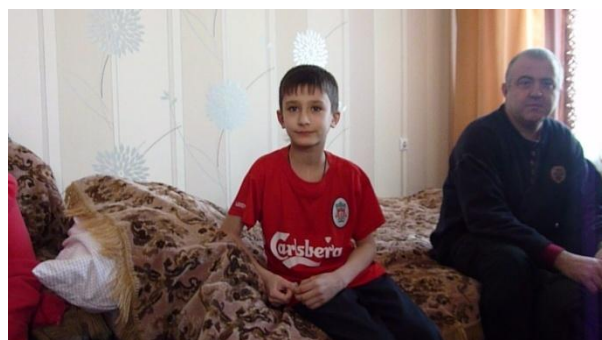
A bit of a shock to the system. Stepping into my first apartment block to find it dark, dirty and smelly (with future visits I found that the first impression usually set the precedent for the condition of the apartments). Zhenya's apartment was small, quite dark, and sparsely furnished. We were shown into her bed-ridden Grandmothers room in which Zhenya and her cousin also slept in bunk beds. When not at school, Zhenya is expected to look after her cousin and Grandmother, and the overall feeling of being cooped up in the apartment felt pretty depressing. Given how bright, happy and cheerful Zhenya is in Edinburgh (she has been coming over for 5 years), it was hard to realise that her home life could be so awful. We asked her how she was doing and she said that all was going well at school, but that she was about to go into hospital for 2 weeks for head and heart problems. This sounded pretty alarming at the time, but as was explained after the visit, a lot of the children (particularly city children) spend time in recuperative hospitals where they get a break from their troubled lifestyles, a chance to rest and eat well, and have the various health checks completed that the state conducts as a direct result of the Chernobyl disaster. We checked later once back in Scotland and know that Zhenya's health is fine, and that she enjoyed her recuperative break.

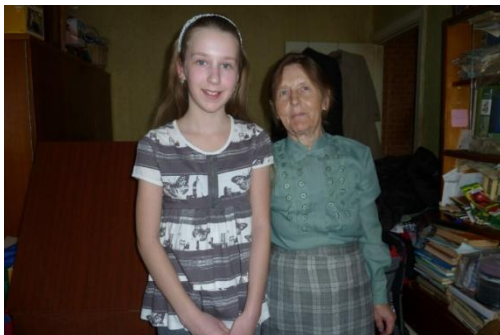
In the afternoon Heidi, Anne & Val (with Kostya) visited Karyna, Zhanna, Julia, Elina, Katia & Masha (Bishop).

Dougie, Tracey, Janice & I (with Katia and her husband Andrei) visited;

**Nikita (Nimmo)** – With his Mum who was great and obviously cares very deeply for him. A nice apartment and Nikita was in great form.

**Vlad (Gorham)** – Another lovely Mum and Vlad was on good form too. A little overwhelmed at first, but he soon relaxed and enjoyed our visit. He lives in the same block as Nikita above.





**Anya (Mayall)** – Lovely to see Anya again. She was looking great (very grown up) and is doing well at school. Her Grandmother was pretty overbearing during the visit, but very grateful for all that we do for Anya. The apartment was cluttered with junk and we all had a good laugh when the 4 of us were asked to sit on the one wee sofa.

**Nikita (Aitken)** – Goodness, Nikita was pretty shy! He too was on good form, and is doing well and working hard at school. His mother has a new job and is working long hours. We never got to see his dog, but we heard him!

**Yana (Park)** – We tried to see Yana at her house in the Gypsy Village but no one was in. Later we found out that she had moved house and we caught up with her and her brother Deinis in their new, but very sparse apartment. Yana was looking incredibly well and grown up, and we had a super visit. Following the visit, and a bit of publicity at the FOCC Conference, Heidi and I managed to find a host group to take her brother who has been desperate to come to the UK for the last 3 years. A huge thanks to the Milton Keynes group, although he's a great chap, and I'm sure they'll be thanking us once they get to know him.



Dougie & Tracey were then dropped off at their Anya's house to spend the evening with her and her family, and the rest of us met up to visit;



**Masha (Grant)** – Wonderful visit. Mess, chaos, smell, dirt, but a well presented Mother obviously completely out of her depth with life and the children. Masha has 3 older brothers and an older sister, and the house and visit were chaotic. The children were wonderful. Fun, bold, engaging, noisy, confident, but a little too wild and independent. Masha was very shy at first, but her brothers and sister kept us well entertained. Strangely, I was convinced that I had seen her big sister (Dasha) before, but this seemed pretty unlikely given the circumstances. I later established that Dasha was also with FOCC in the Portobello group, and I had met her at a Taxi Parade event when our girls and their girls (largely led by Dasha) had fallen out over a dispute about boys!

**Sasha (Girl)** – Probably the nicest home visit of the trip. Sasha's Mum and family were super, and had put on a fantastic spread for us. All of her family have been involved with FOCC, and the benefits were plain to see. Mum was so obviously proud of her home and her lovely children (and so she should be), and was fascinated to find out all about Sasha's visits to





Scotland and how she behaved. Even Dad joined us briefly before we left. A real contrast with the previous visit which had been in the same block of flats.

**Roma** –Roma was on great form. He has a lovely wee flat and a super Mum who obviously dotes upon him. He is doing well at school and misses his Scottish family.



Later that night back at my apartment, I took time to catch my breath and reflect on the events of such a hectic day. It had been amazing to see the children that I knew so well in their own homes. Poverty is the huge problem affecting them all, but even given that, the difference between those with loving and capable parents/guardians, and those in more perilous situations was huge. To see so clearly the differences between the children I had always considered equal in terms of their troubles in Edinburgh, was pretty upsetting. Some of these children are coping with truly awful conditions and to contrast this with what we do for them so strongly affirms the fantastic and much needed support that we provide. So many of them are only one piece of misfortune away from disaster.

All of the children visited today lived in the standard monolithic blocks of flats. Not too horrific to look at from the outside, but often with dark, smelly forbidding stairwells leading to the 4 flats on each level. Walking into each block, you can tell almost immediately how good or bad things will be. The good apartments have rugs, cupboards, and are in good decorative order. The bad have bare floors, roughly built joiners boxes for storage of the few possessions owned, and mess and smell.

It had been an emotional day. The joy of seeing our wonderful children had been tempered with a better understanding of the reality in which they live. In private I shed a few tears that night, but my biggest concern came from a comment by Katia during the day ... “this may be bad, but wait until you have visited the village children”.

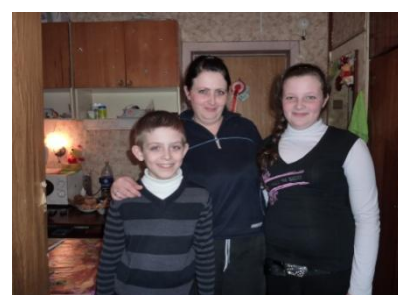
I got a realistic and measured view about what we do. It’s not about money and possessions, it’s about stability, support and showing the children that there is a better world out there. That they can aspire to brighter and better days, and for each child to know as they look around their own home that there are people out there who love, value and care for them. People who make them feel like they matter.

**Fri 11<sup>th</sup>** – Breakfast followed by a trip out to Shenya’s orphanage. Once there we were advised that Shenya was in hospital with flu, so we visited his brother **Vitali** who is also at the orphanage, and set off back to Mogilev to see Shenya at the hospital. After Kostya did a fantastic job of persuading the hospital staff to let us see him, we were able to meet with **Shenya** in a quarantine room. He was recovering well, and was enjoying his short break from the orphanage.



We then returned to Mogilev for more home visits:

1. **Vlad** – We met Vlad with his fantastic Mum and brother and sister in their hostel. He was very shy at first, but soon warmed to us and enjoyed our visit.
2. **Pasha** – He lives in one of the wooden houses in the city and we met him with his Grandmother and sister. He is doing really well and obviously loved his first visit to Scotland and his host family. Kenny (his host father) is No. 1! His older sister was absolutely brilliant with him and when we asked her why she had not been involved with FOCC she said that she would have loved it, but that it's too late for her (she's too old). A sad moment, but one that later turned to delight when after returning home I heard that we will be inviting her over after all. She will be over the moon.
3. **Maxim** – We met maxim with his Mum & sister in their tiny hostel room. He is doing really well and it has been great to see his confidence grow over the years and for him to turn into one of our older boys now. He says he is doing well at school, but his Mum wants him to do better!



In the afternoon Dougie, Tracey (with Anya) and Ian met up with Aleks (Edinburgh West interpreter for the first 3 years), Yadja, Luda & their friend Aleh for a tour of Mogilev (including the history of the city, the Astronomer, the Museum, the Church & Nunnery of St Nicholas, the Dnieper, and not forgetting the plastic bottle house). I was then taken back to Aleks's house and had a fabulous Belarussian supper and a few wee Belarussian whiskies with Aleks, Yadja and Luda!

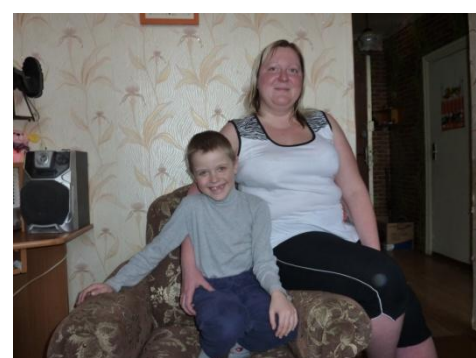
Heidi and Anne visited Angelina, and travelled out of the city to visit Liosha Scott and Natasha Naismith (failed visit).

Val went to visit Tania in hospital and we all met up back in our apartment later that evening to share our experiences of the day.

**Sat 12<sup>th</sup>** – A slightly later start to the day (9.00am - following the social activities of the previous evening) with us all meeting up in the cafe for breakfast. We were joined by **Tania** (who has been to Edinburgh for 4 years running) while her Mother discussed some housing issues with Katia and Heidi. Tania was in great form and it was lovely to sit and chat with her for half an hour. She is so grown up now and is so looking forward to her next summer visit where she will be one of the older girls.

After breakfast it was off with Heidi, Anne and Janice to see some new children as potential new recruits for the Edinburgh West group.

1. **Vadzim** (Craig Family) – Another bizarre moment as we were greeted by Vadzim's Mother. She was the lady who worked in the cafe at the apartments (a huge coincidence). Vadzim was a super kid with a huge (& somewhat toothless) smile



and lots of enthusiasm for travelling to Scotland. He and his Mother were delighted when we said that we would love to invite him into our group, and we had excellent service in the cafe for the rest of the week too!

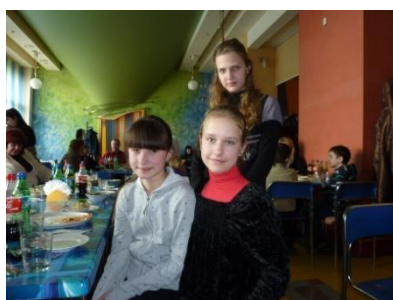
2. **Diana & Dima** – One of the biggest highs of the trip. We went to see Diana at her hostel and were met by her, her Mum and her brother. They were a delightful family full of smiles and giggles, but had obviously fallen on very hard times recently. Their Mother was super. While the apartment was tiny, we could see that it was neat, tidy and there were lots of children’s games, books and toys tucked away in every nook and cranny. She was so obviously a mum that was doing everything she could for her children. Very quickly we established that both Diana and Dima would be eligible for FOCC, and were delighted when Diana let us know with a big smile that she’d love to visit us. The plan was that a representative from our Isle of Man group would be around later to meet Dima. What transpired over the next day was that the Isle of Man group had found another boy and did not come out to see Dima. He was heartbroken and had been crying about it. However, we needed to visit Diana on the Sunday, and on hearing the story let him know that we would love to have him in our group, and that’s when we saw the biggest smiles of the entire visit. A wonderful moment, and a fantastic family.



3. **Melissa (Hay Family)** – We visited Melissa with her Mother, aunt and very new baby brother in their hostel. The family have recently fallen on hard times and have moved into the hostel rooms. Melissa was very quiet and polite until we asked her what she liked. Most children continue to be pretty shy when asked this question and say something like everything, or spaghetti or dogs. Not Melissa, her eyes light up and we were subjected to an enthusiastic list, ending with a most emphatic statement that she likes purple and red, but not black! (I couldn’t help but think that maybe we have another Sasha Girl here).



Following the home visits, it was off to the **City Party** for chicken and chips, pizza and all the fizzy juice that you could drink (there was ice-cream too, but somehow it all disappeared before I could get any). It was great to see all of the city kids together, and especially to see the children that Heidi, Anne and Val had visited while we were seeing others (Masha Bishop, Ksusha, Katia, Elina and Julia). The party was great fun and it was sad to say goodbye to so many children at once, but at least we know that we’ll be seeing them again.





After the party Janice and I had the evening off to spend with our child (Katya) and her family and friends. The evening could not have been more fun, and Katya's family were wonderful hosts with food, vodka and wonderful company a plenty.

Heidi and Anne travelled out to visit Liosha Scott and Natasha Naismith (failed visit).

**Sun 13<sup>th</sup>** – Up very early to say farewell to Val, Tracey & Dougie who set off home at 7.00am.

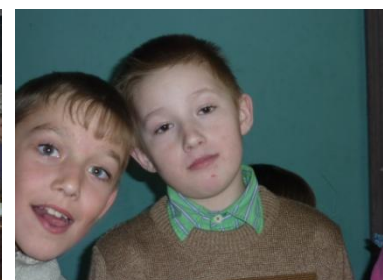
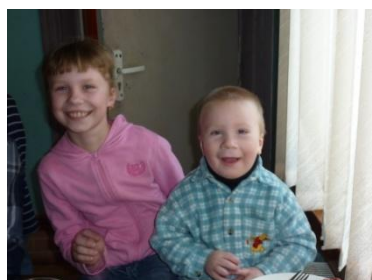


After breakfast, the remaining 4 of us (Heidi, Anne, Janice and Ian) set off with Katia and Andrei to visit Yulia (& her brother Kiryl). Yulia was visited by Heidi last year and was placed with another group. Her family & domestic conditions are about as bad as it gets. It was heartbreaking given her living conditions to find out that she was doing exceptionally well with her school work (the best marks I heard all visit) and it was tough not to shed a tear as

Katia read out her marks as 10, 10, 10, 9, 10, 9. So much potential in such an awful situation. Speaking to Heidi after the visit, it was great to find out that she is hosted by a wonderful FOCC family who have been doing all that they can to help her through her troubles. Put simply, without FOCC, there would be little hope of a normal or decent life for Yulia, and visits like this one show beyond any doubt the positive impact that we have on their young lives.



**Country Party** – A long drive out into the country to meet the remaining 10 of our West Lothian children and their families outside the cafe in which we would have the party. As usual, we were a little late, but it was great to be greeted by Olga, Sasha, Kristina, Angelina, Nikita, Kostya, Vadeem, Andrei, Denis & Natasha. They had all travelled there by taxi (and the families were hugely relieved when we confirmed that we would be paying for the taxi's) and there was a real sense of it being a huge treat for all. At first we were greeted with nervousness and suspicion by many of the families, but this all but disappeared as they saw how much we enjoyed being with their children and the obvious pleasure and ease with which the children interacted with us. The kids all got on very well (as if they hadn't been apart from each other), and a great time was had by all. It has to be said that the parents ate at least as well as the children, and what wasn't eaten was taken home. It was also lovely for me to meet Andrei's (my Belarussian wee boy) sister, Mother and aunt.



Following the party, we visited;

1. **Olga** – Super visit with Olga and her family. It is quite a trek for Olga to get to school, but the countryside (although contaminated) is very beautiful. All of Olga's family were there and she told us how much she had enjoyed her visit, and how much she was looking forward to returning later in the year. When we left we were presented with a bag of pork fat/rind from their recently slaughtered pig. A delicacy in Belarus, but were greatly relieved when Andrei took it.
2. **Kostya** – Another lovely visit with a super family. Kostya is doing very well and loved his trip to Scotland. We joked with his Mum and Dad about having more children (his mother says absolutely not), but we have promised that if she does there will be a place for them in FOCC (incentive enough!).
3. **Diana & Dima** (again) – Back to the city to drop some more food and gifts off with the family (see first visit on Sat 12<sup>th</sup> for further details)



**Mon 14<sup>th</sup> –**



Janice & Ian – Day with **Katya and her family** – Cabbage soup for breakfast at Sveta & Nadia's home – Volva & Angelika's (Katya's uncle and aunt) for lunch with her delightful grandchild

Anya, and a visit to the wooden house. Then off to the War Memorial, the Zoo, the Church with the frozen water bathing (I couldn't believe it when Sveta and Katya broke the ice to go for a swim), then back into the city for a super meal (with lots more vodka) where we were joined by Angelika and Nadia (Katya's Grandmother). A wonderful day with great company. Katya is now so grown up (and she's only 13), and I am so proud of her in many, many ways.



Heidi & Anne – New children – Tanya in the city, Sasha in the country & visited our children from the West Lothian group - Deinis, Christina, Vadeem & Angelina, and tried once again to visit Liosha Scott and Natasha Naismith (failed visit).



**Tue 15<sup>th</sup>** – Out to the countryside with Heidi, Anne, Janice, Katia and Andrei again, and invited Julie Tromp from the Maghull group to join us.

1. **Natasha** – A very sobering visit. We were met by Natasha (in her normal semi-feral and enthusiastic style) and her Grandmother. In her pretty run down and grotty kitchen her Grandmother broke down telling us how her savings (100,000 roubles - £25) had been stolen and she had no idea how she was going to cope (obviously we helped her out). Natasha was on good form, although still very skinny, but was obviously delighted to see us with her wild eyes and big smiles, and clutching Rosie her doll. During the visit her Mother returned to the house, but waited in the porch, and said nothing to us (or Natasha) as we left.



2. **Andrei** – A lovely visit with my wee boy. Andrei was pretty shy (as he always is), but relaxed a bit after we had settled down and had some lunch. Julie spoke to his sister Vika with a view to her joining FOCC (which she has now done, and will be hosted by none other than Julie herself ... fantastic). We met Andrei's Grandmother (obviously the head of the household) who was a lovely woman who keeps everything together for the family, and she told us how much Andrei had enjoyed and benefitted from his visit.



3. **Dzianis** (Robertson) – We stopped at a school to visit Deinis who was excited to see us in front of all of his school mates. He was a great character, very polite, and I'm sure will love coming to Scotland and fitting in with our West Lothian group. While we were talking to Deinis we also met **Christina** & Deinis (who are already with our West Lothain group) who were both excited to see us again and loved telling their friend all about us. Christina was particularly delightful as her usual shyness was forgotten as she showed off her foreign friends to her classmates, and it was just good fun embarrassing Deinis in front of his classmates with OTT cuddles and kisses!



4. **Sasha** – Another super visit with a lovely family (Sasha is Anne's child). It is easy to see where Sasha gets her warmth and kindness from, with a fabulous spread put on for us. Sasha was on great form, indeed she came with us to see Nikita who lives in the same village, although several miles away. Her family were very kind and





friendly and we joked that their pig could be called Anne as a mark of thanks, but had a huge laugh when they said it was actually called Katia (our interpreters name) – and so began the Sveena Katia jokes! When visiting families you cannot help but be worried that you will say or do something that might offend. I was getting pretty tired of families offering us food, but never sitting down and eating with us, so as things were pretty relaxed I asked Katia to tell them to sit and eat with us. Katia spoke to them and then advised that they could not ... they did not have enough plates ... another reality check!

5. **Nikita** – Worryingly we were advised that Nikita had recently moved house, and that the new house was a big improvement on the last one. I'm glad I didn't see the old one! Nikita is a super boy with a lot of character, and over his visit last year I noted that he was pretty smart too, so it was no surprise to see him at his desk working when we arrived. He was with his Mother, his wee sister & new baby brother. Mum has obviously had a hard life and is struggling with the new baby. The house was very sparse, with one big room split using thin curtains and there is



a small porch / kitchen area as you walk in. In the main living area the floorboards lifted on the other side of the room as you walked about. Nikita however was very well and delighted to see us all. For his age, and only having had one visit, his English is pretty good (when he tries) and we were able to laugh about the fun he had while in Scotland, and hear how he missed his host family. After the visit we all had a good laugh when Julie asked if this photo was Grandma holding the baby (sorry Heidi)!

6. **Natasha** – Our final country visit was to see Natasha as a potential new girl for the Maghull Group with Julie Tromp. Natasha was being looked after in a sparse living/bedroom by her older sister (there were 4 sisters). They had been there all day with little but the TV to entertain themselves. I sat down in one of the few wooded seats and the armrest fell apart. However, all the girls were lovely, and it was her big sister that told us a little about Natasha. While we were visiting, an exhausted Mum dashed in just before we left. She had been working at the local farm (she is a dairy maid) when word reached her that we had arrived and she had dashed back through the snow on her bike to see us. After the visit, Julie was convinced that Natasha would be found a host family in her group.

7. Return to the city and another visit to Dima & to pick up Diana from school (Anne had yet more gifts!).

We rounded of the day, and indeed our visit, with a meal out in a super basement restaurant decorated a bit like the inside of a castle.

**Wed 16<sup>th</sup>** – Packed up and ready for the bus to Minsk leaving Mogilev at 5.00am. Flights from Minsk to Gatwick and Gatwick back to Edinburgh were all on schedule. However, it was chilling to get back to Gatwick and to buy newspapers to find out about the Japanese earthquake, tsunami and potential nuclear disasters (there had been very limited coverage in Belarus).

**Final thoughts** – Having returned home I can now reflect on the visit. It was certainly all I had hoped it would be and much more. Getting on so well with my own children’s families was very special, and the highs and lows of seeing the children I know so well from their visits to Edinburgh were both heartbreaking and delightful. The excitement of meeting new children who will be joining our group was lovely (I can’t wait to see how they settle in). However, the strongest feeling of all is that of a rejuvenated sense of the importance of what we do for these children, and an overwhelming feeling of how much they need and benefit from our support. What lies beyond the thousands of city hostel and apartment doors that we walked passed, and the hundreds of ramshackled wooden houses that we drove past in the countryside doesn’t bear to think about, and will keep us all very busy as a charity for a long time to come.



There seems to be a debate within FOCC comparing/contrasting the different needs and problems between the city children and the country children. I had anticipated that the conditions and incredible poverty of the country kids would



make their needs appear to be a greater priority. However, comparing these conditions with the terrible housing and sheer depressing nature of life for some of the kids in the city, it simply isn’t possible to priorities one area over another. What is very clear, is that every child is an individual with their own unique set of troubles, and somehow, what we do for them does make a big and positive difference.

My final thanks and admiration go to all of the interpreters who did a fantastic job looking after us, transporting us around the city and country, enabling us to communicate with our families, and so much more. Katia, her husband Andrei, and her team (including Kostya for us, but also many other interpreters for the other groups) did a wonderful job.

Final: Since returning home, we have also been advised that Tanya, Val’s wee girl who had been in hospital, is now fully recovered and is back at home.