

Professional child-care in Dzerzhinsk is emerging as a pace-setter in Russia due to a welcome coincidence of the commitment and skill of veterans and a younger generation of recruits to social work in this field. The city is home to a project named 'Foster Parent School', currently being funded by a charity, Friends House Moscow.

In October 2010, and again in March 2011, I made the overnight train journey eastwards from Moscow to meet both professionals and users of the project. It was fascinating to witness the emergence of new services in a culture so markedly different from our own, and heart-warming to recognise the passion for improving the lives of vulnerable children.

Fostering and adoption are new to Russia, emergent only since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Dzerzhinsk was a closed city in the Soviet era, dedicated to the manufacture of chemical weapons. It is just 80 years old but has the appearance of a much older city because of its grand classical architecture, which was much praised as Stalin's favourite. There is a stark legacy of pollution in this city of around 240,000 people – life expectancy has been reported as approximately 47 years, although this is disputed by the city authorities. As such I was expecting a dreary place so was pleasantly surprised by wide streets lined with birch trees, nestled between once fine but now shabby buildings.

The child population is 48,000, and the local authority looks after 2,000 'orphans', although only about 220 are orphans in the UK sense of the word. Approximately 645 children are in foster care, the rest in children's homes. They monitor 600 other families where the situation is regarded as 'not good'. Local success in increasing the rate of adoption has been recognised by President Medvedev and things are moving forward.

The Soviet era employed a Family Code, which is still used today, albeit in an updated form, outlining the legal measures for protecting children. Child protection has historically been the preserve of the police juvenile section and, to some degree, this remains the case today. Applications for children to be removed from their parents and looked-after by the state are heard by a commission. Svetlana Vershinina, the head of a secondary school, and Nina Kamina, police inspector and head of police juvenile section, sit on this commission and have become a force for change in the area. Now well into their sixties, Svetlana is the head of the Department of Fostering and Adoption and Nina is retired and runs Family Law, a small non-governmental body created largely by herself and Svetlana.

The dormitory and play room at The Foster Parent School in Dzerzhinsk



Adopting a new path

Picking up on BASW's developing relationship with social work in Russia, UK practitioner **Daphne Sanders** shares her experience of children and families social work in the city of Dzerzhinsk where fostering and adoption arrangements differ markedly from the UK

Svetlana's team does everything we would regard as child-care social work: family support work, child protection, supporting looked-after children, fostering and adoption work, and after-care. Her team consists of eight social pedagogues, all university graduates in psychology with certified, post-graduate training in child protection. All the staff are women as the salaries are too 'modest' to attract men. Svetlana talks of her team in glowing terms; of their dedication in the face of extremes of human distress and huge workloads, coupled with fine professionalism.

In practice statutory support for foster or adoptive families does not happen, and everyone is keenly aware of this deficit. Furthermore, nationally, if foster carers want training they have to pay for it, so it rarely happens. Many placements continue to be with members of the extended family or private foster carers, also known as guardians. Foster Parent School is actively seeking to amend these discrepancies.

Nina Kamina founded Family Law and made her first application to Friends House Moscow around ten years ago. Starting with providing

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legal advice to children arrested by the police, she has steadily taken on new areas of work with children. The first course of Foster Parent School has just finished and involved 13 foster caring couples. They received 34 hours of training over six months, covering child development, attachment, the effects of abuse and deprivation and managing behaviour.

Alongside the work of the Foster Parent School, carers and children in Dzerzhinsk also benefit from the efforts of another dedicated service. Founded in 1993, the Dzerzhinsk Centre for Psychological and Pedagogical support is staffed by a director, eight pedagogical psychologists and seven social teachers, providing a service to school age children and their families on a referred or self-referral basis. The individuals we met were impressive young, professional women (again), with a clear idea of the task and a warm commitment to it. They routinely evaluate the work they do and are modifying the training accordingly. Together with Svetlana, they are building a case for local authority funding for foster carer training.

Differences in practice between the UK and professionals operating in Russia are often as much about our wider cultures as about any notable professional issues. For example, I used the term 'talking therapies' and the team were eager to know what I meant. After an explanation the response I received was that the only 'talking therapy' that existed in Russia was that which could be found around the kitchen table, suggesting that there is no tradition of talking about family problems with anyone outside the familial unit except perhaps a close friend.

Engaging foster carers in seeking help with child-care problems is, therefore, challenging and culturally unusual. The feedback I received from talking with two foster carers who had engaged in a previous foster family support project, run by Nina, was that their families were at breaking point, but it was only Nina herself who had persuaded them to take the risk of trusting someone outside of the family to help. So the flipside to the cultural constraint around 'talking' is the excitement about the impact of such therapies when people have tried them.

One feature of the legal duties of Russian

social pedagogues has no UK parallel. Remarkably, where a child is removed permanently because of neglect or abuse they apply to the courts to have the rights to the child's parents' flat transferred to the child, with the parents then evicted. The flat is then made good and rented out, with the income going into an account for the child to access later on coming of age, when the child is also able to occupy the flat.

'Coming of age'

An indication of social work 'coming of age' in Russia – if by this we mean becoming increasingly comparable to the UK at last – is an unfortunate one. When I met Svetlana in March 2011 she was furious about her experience that week appearing on a TV programme in Moscow where she sought to defend the actions of her department over the temporary removal of three small, neglected children whose mother had left them alone when she had gone away. A local reporter had publicised the story in Moscow, offering the mother's point of view and prompting widespread criticism of the decisions involved. Svetlana outlined the facts of the case and wanted to know what a UK service would have done: after a detailed question and answer session I concluded that we would have done exactly the same. It was all-too illustrative of the problem that she also recounted another recent example of another mother, again where her children had been removed and again where the media had drawn attention to her 'plight'. The mother eventually persuaded a court to return her four children, all of whom subsequently died in a domestic fire. Both Svetlana and Nina were outraged by the power of the media being used in this way. The distrust between the media and the profession is not just endemic to Britain.

For the many children who aren't adopted or fostered, children's homes, inevitably, are the accommodation on offer. In Russia such homes fall under the auspices of the local authority Education Department. Children removed or abandoned at birth are placed in nurseries until they are three-years-old, while those born with serious disabilities are placed in a specialist children's home. The incidence of birth defects

in Russia is high. The home I visited was founded at the end of the Second World War for the orphaned children of Russia's war heroes and continues to have an esteemed reputation. It is home to 137 children aged between three and 19-years-old, 34 of whom have special needs. It is staffed by teachers, psychologists, social workers and care workers and has the services of a doctor and a dentist.

At this particular home the children attended local schools, an enlightened practice compared with children's homes elsewhere. Each year-group has two 'house mothers' who are teachers by profession and remain with the same group year-on-year – most staff are long-serving. The home has a computer room, sewing room, woodwork room, common room with a facility for making hot drinks, dance studio and gym, as well as bedrooms shared between two, three or four young people – the youngest children sleep in dormitories with the beds at one end and a play area at the other. Toys and personal possessions are everywhere but are noticeably tidy and ordered. Older children run clubs for the younger ones in the group. There is a home museum, with photos and records of achievement. They are just completing the first year of a new scheme in which young people can request guardianship and undertake a year's preparation work together with their prospective guardians before commencing the arrangement formally.

On the one hand this home is simply an institution in which privacy and individuality are limited. On the other hand, every care is being taken to maximise individuality, emotional security and opportunity. The staff I met were warm, child-centred and evidently competent. The experience these children have is one of continuity and security; they know where they are and what they can expect, even if it may not be ideal.

Although there are parallels between Dzerzhinsk and the UK, there are some notable differences. In many respects the scale of the problems faced in Dzerzhinsk is greater and the resources much diminished, but morale there is high. I wonder whether it is the direction of travel which is the vital difference: they are just in the foothills but walking strongly, while we have been far enough up the hill to obtain a good prospect but now have to scramble to retain a footing. Whatever the comparisons, just being able to play a small part in their experience has been inspiring.



Daphne Sanders is a retired assistant director of social services. For more about Friends House Moscow, visit <http://friendshousemoscow.org>