

## **Developing children's services in Bulgaria**

### **About the project:**

This project was initiated by the Department for International Development in 2003 to support Bulgaria with EU accession preparation. There was a need to improve services for disabled children. A delegation from three towns in Bulgaria visited Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council where I was Head of Early Years to meet staff, local politicians, and parent partnership groups. We demonstrated examples of good quality provision, and shared learning about child centred service development.

I was asked to lead a return delegation to Bulgaria. We aimed to raise local awareness about the needs of disabled children and support with service planning, development of parent advocacy and partnerships.

### **The Challenges:**

Entrenched beliefs and mindsets which excluded disabled children and people from local communities in Bulgaria were rife. Some citizens had written to the local Mayor expressing disgust that disabled children were sometimes out in public.

Actual numbers of disabled children were unknown by municipality leaders, and officers felt pressured to under-exaggerate numbers, causing the extent of the issue to not be recognised.

Parents going to work had few options; children were left unattended during the day or living in an institution. Parents struggled to have their voice heard and to know how to work with the municipality.

Bulgaria was a poor country, resources for disabled children's services were limited with many other pressing needs being prioritised.

### **What we did:**

We needed to engage effectively with community leaders and parents. We needed to build empathy, understanding, motivation and commitment, challenge deeply held beliefs, support leaders in making first steps to improving provision and parents in their confidence to build collaboration.

I invited Elsa, a young woman with Down's Syndrome who was commissioned to deliver disability awareness training in Bolton. Representatives from education, health, parent partnerships and local politicians were also invited. The delegation emulated the multi-professional response we had developed in Bolton.

In Bulgaria we visited schools, an institution in the mountains, and a hospital. We attended municipality and parent meetings, and met with the mayor and Minister for Social Care. We talked with parents wanting to form a NGO (Non-Government Organisation), teachers and children. Elsa spoke powerfully of her experience growing up, what she'd needed and the

contribution she now made. I was briefed for a radio interview to raise awareness of disabled children's needs and engage positive interest with the public about changes ahead.

On the last night of our visit, we ate together with the visiting mayors and municipality leaders. It was -12°C in the day, seriously cold at night and we were tired. The mayor from a local town stood up to speak, 'I had thought these children could do nothing, that they had nothing to contribute, and there was nothing for us to do. But I have met Elsa, *and my heart has changed*, we must do something for these young people.'



#### **Outcome so far:**

Following the visit, I supported with EU bid writing to match fund finance the Minister ringfenced for a children's day-care centre in Sopot.

Today, the children's centre in Sopot is used daily by children and young people. Ongoing municipality funding is in place. On my last visit, fifty children were using the centre supported by sixteen staff from a range of professional roles. Market gardening by the young people on the site helps with sustainability following a project funded by the Netherlands. The young disabled people help with food preparation for the children. Parents go to work knowing their children and in good care. The staff are diligent and mindful that children will always need advocates committed to their needs. The centre is managed by staff and parent representatives from the NGO.

## **Outcome so far:**

In the square in Karlovo in June 2017 I watched quietly as a young man with Down's Syndrome swayed to music being played by a band. He moved confidently amongst the crowd. I thought of Elsa and the profound difference she made by joining the delegation.

Nikolai Enchev (previously Deputy Mayor of Karlovo) reflects on the work:

*The goal of this project was to establish a good partnership between the NGO sector and local authorities. We learned how to establish and manage a successful day care centre.*

*The visit to Bolton was very useful, we saw very interesting practices of the local NGO. The knowledge helped us to improve the parents' NGO activities. I think it was really a successful project, both the visit and discussions were very important for us.*