



Coventry City Council

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Public report

REPORT BACK ON CONFERENCE/SEMINAR

REPORT TO: Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee **Date:** 5th July, 2006
REPORT OF: Councillor Ram Lakha
Lord Mayor
TITLE: Leading Delegation from SEWA International (Coventry)
DATE: 4th – 18th February, 2006
VENUE: India

1. Recommendation

The Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee is asked to note the purpose of the visit and the progress of the work of both Charities from Coventry - Sewa International and Global Care.

2. Background

The Coventry Branch of Sewa International (registered Charity) was supported by Coventry City Council for their charity work following the Earthquake in Gujarat (India). After the destruction, our city sponsored the rebuilding of a village named Chapredi, through Sewa International. To see the progress, former Lord Mayors Councillor Dave Chater and former Councillor Sucha Bains visited the area. Similarly, Sewa International has been active in the rehabilitation and relief work in various parts of India after the destruction caused by the Tsunami waves. Mr. Sanjay Jagatia, Secretary of Sewa International, has been trying to persuade me to see the developments of their work with **the intention of reporting back to our city as part of their accountability for the money they raised from the people of Coventry** and other areas.

Originally, I was reluctant to go because I did not want to stay away from home for more than two or three days because of the health problems of my wife. At the same time, I felt duty bound as Patron of the Charity to fulfil my obligation. Whilst Meto's health has become slightly stable, I agreed to "bite the bullet".

Whilst I agreed to visit, I realised that the itinerary of the visit which included Delhi to Kanyakumari in South India is close to Sri Lanka, so I decided to 'pop over' to Sri Lanka to see the work of "Global Care", another locally registered Coventry Charity, which is also doing similar work in Sri Lanka. As Lord Mayor, I am also the Patron of this Charity and also led the appeal very actively for raising the funds for the relief work of Tsunami victims. Mr. Ron Newby the Chief Executive of Global Care was very pleased and supported me.

3. Cost of attending

Cost of air-flights was funded from my hospitality budget. The road travelling cost and accommodation cost was funded mainly from Sewa International all over India (and partly supported by Global Care in Sri Lanka).

International Airfare	£385.00
Travel Insurance	£ 38.37
Air India Internal Flights	£570.00
TOTAL COST	£993.37

4. Benefits

To assess the input of both Coventry Charities - Sewa International and Global Care for the developments of rehabilitation for the victims of Tsunami Disaster in South Asia as part of their accountability to Coventry citizens who donated funds for the purpose.

List of background papers

Proper Officer: Chris Hinde
Director
Legal and Democratic Services

Author: Ram Lakha, Lord Mayor
and Jane Barlow

Tel Number: 024 7683 3047

(Any enquiries should be directed to the above)

Other contributors:

Papers open to public inspection

Description of paper: **Location**

APPENDIX

Details of the Visit

On Saturday, 4th February, I left Coventry and joined two other members of my delegation, Mr Leonard Evans and Mr Babu Mistry from Sewa International Coventry at Heathrow Airport. We landed at Indra Gandhi International Airport in Delhi in the early morning of Sunday 5th February. Mr. Sanjay Jagatia and Miss Muna Chauhan met us at the airport. They left Coventry a couple of days before to make the final arrangements for the visit in India. They were supported by the Co-ordinator of Sewa Bharti/Sewa International, Mr Navin Parsad. Sewa Bharti is the “sister” Charity of Sewa International who works on many projects on behalf of Sewa International in India.

We reached the hotel just after 4am, and had a little rest before leaving to visit an **Orphanage called Matrichhaya** at Minyanwali, which is **funded by Sewa International**. It was very impressive to see how the childcare is arranged for **16 children**, especially the care of newly born abandoned children. It is purely a voluntary organisation with no funding from any government agencies.

Then we visited another project in a slum area of Raghuvir Nagar in Delhi. This project is linked with a local Hindu Temple and supported by Sewa Bharti. In Keshav-Vihar, we saw the children receiving primary education in the temple on Sunday. I was informed that these children will have very little or no chance of having any education because of social and economic situation of their family circumstances. I also saw a class of a few women who were also learning to read and write. There were some children who were taught computer and some other basic skills as part of integrated project for economic development. This project is run by volunteers of Sewa Bharti and I was informed that the project was not funded by Sewa International.

In the late afternoon we visited a newly built very large Hindu temple known as Akshar Dham.

Next day (6th Feb) after leaving very early to fly from Delhi, we landed at Kamraj Airport in Chennai at around 10am. After having a cup of tea with the Chairman of Sewa International India, we travelled a long journey on road to Nagappattinam. On the way, we visited another project of rehabilitation at Poempuhar about seventy kilometres before reaching late evening at Nagappattinam.

On the morning of the 7th February, we visited a **girls’ orphanage, which has 16 young girls who lost their parents due to the Tsunami**. Their support and care is all through Sewa Bharti and they receive the free education from Government School. After this visit we visited the office of Sewa Bharti at Nagappattinam to see how the organisation works through a group of very dedicated volunteers and we saw a health centre as well as a vocational training centre for girls equipped with some computers. From here we visited a village called Keechankuppam.

At Keechankuppam, **Sewa International is funding the construction of 400 houses** out of 800 houses of Sewa Bharti as part of the **rehabilitation projects for the homeless who lost their homes during Tsunami Waves**. Construction work was in progress for 248 houses in first phase. At this place, **I handed over a Coventry Plaque** with the wish that it will be fixed for public display on the entrance to the housing estate. From this area, we left on the long road for Kanyakumari as our next destination. On the way, we suffered from a punctured tyre, which made us very late. In fact it was in the early morning before we reached our destination and to rest for a few hours. Although it was a very beautiful place at

the end corner of South India, we were not lucky enough to gaze at the beauty because of lack of time!

On the morning of the 8th February, we visited a **boys' orphanage with 35 inmates** before they were ready for school. This orphanage is currently operating from a rented house whilst a new building is under construction called Anbu Illam. Although the land was donated by a local resident lady primarily for Hanuman Temple, she agreed to use the land for this project, **which is funded by Sewa International**. Work at the ground floor was complete and the first floor was in progress. It is expected to be completed in June 2006. From here we went to visit another **vocational training centre for women**. I was informed that it was inaugurated on 20th January by an Australian couple from Indian origin. After rushing from lunch to catch up with the time we managed to reach Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) airport and managed to board the flight for Colombo at the last minute because the authorities were sympathetic to us!

We landed in Colombo at about six o'clock in the evening where the volunteers of Sewa Sangam led by Mr Wijaypalan were ready with a van and a car to transport us. Once again, we suffered from the sudden overheating of the engine of a car. Mr Wijaypalan appeared to be quite a resourceful businessman and he arranged another car. Although it took a little time, we were on the road for another over 10 hours' long journey from Colombo at (West coast of Sri Lanka) to the east coast of the country to reach at Batticaloa where we arrived in the early hours of 9th February.

We were welcomed by the Mayor of Ratanpura, Mr W. A. Nimal Dayawansa during the evening.

After resting a short while to wash and clean, we were ready to visit the next project on Thursday morning. We visited a village called Pandiruppu in Batticaloa district where Sewa Sangam, another **sister charity of Sewa International in Sri Lanka constructed new houses for the homeless victims of Tsunami. An inaugural ceremony was arranged and I was asked to hand over the keys of 10 newly built houses to the homeless families.** It was extremely emotional as well as a joyful time for those new residents of those houses who lost almost everything and in many cases some members of their families as well. They expected me to join every house for their religious ceremonies for first entry to their house. As an alternative to their wish, we decided to meet their request by delegating different members of our delegation for visiting their houses. Despite the sleeplessness and tiredness, our delegation was so pleased to be with those residents. I was "warned" that the media in Sri Lanka was covering the event. **A successful effort was made to promote Coventry.** We had our lunch in the village before we left for Colombo in the afternoon.

Once again, it was a very interesting long journey in very bad and rainy weather and passing through a jungle in the middle of the night. A wild elephant blocked the road. So we had no alternative other than sit in our cars and wait till the elephant decided to move in his own leisure time! During this hilly journey, some members of our delegation suffered some health problems. We reached Colombo on Friday morning.

After freshening up for a little while, we were ready for the **next visit arranged by Global Care**. At that time we decided to leave one member of our team at the hotel to allow him a bit of a rest due to his health problems. The co-ordinator of their sister charity - Community Concern Society accompanied by another worker led us to the **Tsunami Construction projects at Dehiwela**. The charity is constructing blocks of flats on the site under the direction of the Director, Mr Jacoo Groot, who also showed us around.

One block of 16 flats is funded by Global Care and is almost near to completion with all the necessary facilities. **I presented a Coventry Plaque to Mr Groot with the expectation that it will be fitted for public display at the entrance of the block.** He assured me that he would ensure that it would be fitted as I asked. We were led to the next site where a large construction was taking place. Like the previous site, some blocks of flats are almost ready and others are still in the early stages. I was informed that Global care is funding a block of flats on this site as well.

From here we were welcomed by the children of **Morning Star School** and the chief Executive of Community Concern Society, Mrs. Sriyani Tidball. We toured the school and looked at the facilities in the school, which was very impressive and satisfying. We were then led to the Mayor's office and welcomed by the Mayor of Dehiwela, Mr. Danasiri Amarathunga and the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. S.V.D. Kesarralal Gunasekara, who was wearing a Warwickshire necktie! I presented the Mayor with a Civic Tie from Coventry. After having lunch with the Mayor, we left for Colombo to board flight for Mumbai and stayed at Mumbai overnight.

On Saturday morning, 11th February, we boarded the flight for Jam Nagar. From Jam Nagar we took to the road to Porbander in Gujarat with another long journey and arrived late in the night.

On the outset, it appeared that Sunday 12th February would be less busy, but it turned out to be the same like any other day! Our delegation visited a well-known Temple of Bhaishri Rameshbhai Ojha, which had a very large gathering for the whole week. I was informed that about five thousand people visited the temple every day of that week. There were over 1500 British Indians who had rented tents for their stay at the campus. As Lord Mayor of Coventry, I was given special attention by the management of the temple and was shown around. I had to stay in suit and chain of office in a very hot day. Despite the punishing dress code, it was great to be received as dignitary and being interviewed by the local TV Channel and I took the opportunity to promote the City of Coventry.

After lunch, we visited a **Primary School sponsored by Sewa International Coventry**, especially the construction of many classrooms funded by Jagatia family from Coventry. Later on we visited a **project, which provides care for the mentally disturbed people.** This is purely funded by volunteers and is also financially supported by Mrs. Bhanomati K. Jagatia **from Coventry.**

On 13th February we had another long journey to Ahmedabad and started off slightly late because I wanted to alter my flight arrangements to come home a day early and to sort out my flight ticket. After wasting a bit of time, we were advised that we would have to sort that out at Ahmedabad! It delayed our start, so we decided to stay at Rajkot because it was too far to travel at night.

Next day on 14th February, we arrived at Ahmedabad during lunchtime and managed to sort out my air-ticket. Another couple from Coventry, supporters of Sewa International joined us. From Ahmedabad we left for Bhuj and stayed at Gandhi Dham overnight. The following day we visited some other projects in the villages, Chapredi and Mithapaspalia with **schools sponsored by Sewa International.** It is worth reminding ourselves that the **people of Coventry through Sewa international sponsored the rebuilding of Chapredi.** It is also worth mentioning that some concerns were raised in the media that Sewa International did not support non-Hindus and the people from lower castes of Hindu Community. I must say that the wrong impression was produced because the Temple in the village was funded solely from the money raised by Hindu Temples in Coventry and it is stated as such on the foundation stone of the temple.

I have visited four houses of four different communities. One of them is Muslim family and another one is from Dalit (lower caste) community. I did not see any segregation of the communities. In fact all the communities are living cohesively in the village. I was told by the village volunteer who said he is from Aheer (backward) community and is a qualified Civil Engineer and now self-employed as an agricultural worker on his own land.

We gave some books and pencils to the children in the schools (no cost to City Council). We also visited Rapar Swaminarayan Gurukul where **Sewa international has sponsored a part of the construction of the school**. We saw the work progressing on the identical lines as another building previously built which is trying to cope to cater for all the facilities of school. We were informed that when the new building is ready, accommodation for the study classes would be rearranged to suit the needs of the students. The area is very deprived area in Bhuj and was heavily affected during the earthquake in 2001. The effects of the earthquake are still heavily visible as reminder of a sad disaster!

On Thursday, 16th February, we visited **Haripar village where Coventry's Godiva Lions have sponsored the children's home after the earthquake** in this area of Bhuj. We were shown the facilities, which make the difference to the lives of children. The project is very **clearly marked** with bold letters as **Coventry's Project**. After seeing this project, the delegation members split up! Mr. Babu Mistry and Mr. Len Evans stayed with me and we took the flight from Bhuj to Mumbai in the evening. We stayed for a few hours in a hotel in Mumbai before leaving at 1:30am back to Shatarpati Shivaji International Airport to report in two hours prior to flight. We arrived back at Heathrow on the morning of Friday 17th February and in Coventry after lunchtime.

I am very thankful to many volunteers of Sewa International, in particular, Mr. Navin Parsad of Delhi who supported me and other members of the delegation and provided food and accommodation during the tour of India and Sri Lanka through their volunteers' network. I also thank Mr. Sanjay Jagatia who "almost bullied" me to see the projects of Sewa International despite the fact that I never spent much time to support them. I would also like to thank Sanjay and his assistant Muna Chauhan for making the hasty arrangements to fit in my diary.

I also thank Mr. Ron Newby who supported me during my visit to Global Care in Sri Lanka. I am proud to say that so far I have done my share to support Global Care.

Although it was quite a punishing schedule to cover a very wide area in two countries for the visit, it **is very satisfying to witness that the funds raised in Coventry by Coventry people through "Sewa International" and "Global Care" are making a positive difference** to the lives of those people who need them most.

It makes all Coventry People very proud to be known as an International City.