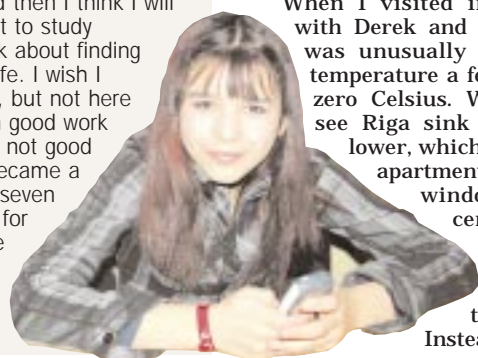


LIFE IN LATVIA: (Left) Derek Blois, from Aylsham, with some of the children the charity Hope For Latvia is helping. (Above and right) Shared washing facilities in the social housing block where Jenya Kuznecova and her family live.

JENYA'S STORY

"I have a grandmother and mother, and dad left us when I was three years old. I live just with my grandmother and my uncle, her son. We live in one room, without a kitchen. My mother drinks sometimes. Well, all the time! When I was younger it was terrible, but now I just don't think about it. I used to cry every day. My uncle drinks and he smokes as well. So in one room, it's not nice. "In Latvia, all the children who don't have good families, it's because of drink. Like Russians - every time, they drink! "But my grandmother doesn't drink. She is 83 years old. She is Russian but has lived her whole life in Latvia, and my mother is Latvian. This little room is about 20 lats a month. Last year we had this room, and it hadn't been paid for. People said to get out from this room. Derek gave me money to pay for it. I don't know how to say it, but they helped me up. I don't want to remember my old life, or to think where I would be without Derek and Ian. I don't know if I would be in school. Derek is like a dad for me. And Ian, he is really like my best friend. I love all the people who come and help here. In Latvia children really need help because otherwise they have nobody. In my spare time I go walking around with my friends. There's nothing else to do because it all costs money. In Latvia there's no money. My hope is that I will finish school - I have another year and then I think I will go to university. I want to study economics. I just think about finding a better place in my life. I wish I could be a policeman, but not here in Latvia, it's not such good work here. In Latvia there's not good job opportunities. I became a Christian about six or seven years ago. If it wasn't for that maybe I would be on the street now or doing some bad things."



Continued from previous page  
"The whole idea is to break the cycle of poverty and help people to help themselves," says Derek Blois, who runs Hope for Latvia.  
"We will build shop units and train these families to work in them. When they come in they will know very clearly that it's a five-year plan and the aim is to get them on their feet. They will pay their taxes and rent and will be integrated back into society.  
"We think it's an exciting vision, and the principle of helping them to help themselves is the right one."  
The Isaiah House charity has bought a plot of land, has architects' plans drawn and a construction company lined up. Riga City Council and the Latvian government have given the plan their approval. All that is needed now is the finance, and that is where next month's Pound Out Poverty campaign comes in.  
"If every person in Norfolk gave £1, we would raise the best part of £1m and we would nearly be there," says Derek.  
"The thing about supporting a project like this is that because we are a very small charity, every pound you give goes straight to the families.  
"If we can get a substantial amount of money in then it will make such a difference to people's lives. I would love to bring every single person in Norfolk here to see how people are living and the work that we are doing, because I know that they would all give a pound then."  
When I visited in mid-December with Derek and his colleagues it was unusually warm, with the temperature a few degrees above zero Celsius. Winter will often see Riga sink to -20C (-4F) or lower, which is devastating in apartments with smashed windows and no central heating. The city is usually covered by snow at this time of year. Instead when I visited

there was a cold humidity in the air, an all-pervasive dampness that seeps into your skin and bones. In midwinter the days never quite escape the night: from about 10am to 2pm there is a grey twilight and then the darkness creeps back again.  
But amid all this gloom there is a remarkable ray of light: the children. Their energy, resourcefulness and positive attitude is something to behold. You cannot help but be impressed by their determination to escape the poverty trap and make their lives a success.  
Many of the children are trilingual: Russian is their first language, then Latvian, and their English ranges from basic to fluent. Ethnic Russians form around 30pc of the population of Latvia, a legacy of the many years of Soviet occupation, and they make up most of the poorest section of the society.  
"In the past we have invested into the adults of the families but we hit a brick wall with some people," says Derek. "We have found that by investing in the children and young people you get a better response."  
Alcoholism forms a large part of the problem with the older generation and when you see the conditions people live in, it is not hard to see why so many seek solace in the bottle.  
"Vodka is cheaper than bottled water," he explains, "and when you sit with a mum and three kids in those rooms and it's -20C, and there's no heat and it's damp and there's no food, and she can get hold of a bottle of vodka for 20p, you can understand why she does it. I don't agree with it but she gets out of her head for a half a day and you can understand why."  
IT IS SAD BUT TRUE TO SAY THAT MANY OF THESE CHILDREN'S PARENTS SEEM TO BE BEYOND TURNING AROUND: their lives are too far down a very bleak road. But their children are at a crossroads, on the cusp of adulthood. There is hope here. To see them out in the evening at a restaurant (when they visit Riga Derek and his colleague Ian Dyble, who runs Help, pay for them to have a meal out) they look

NEXT WEEK

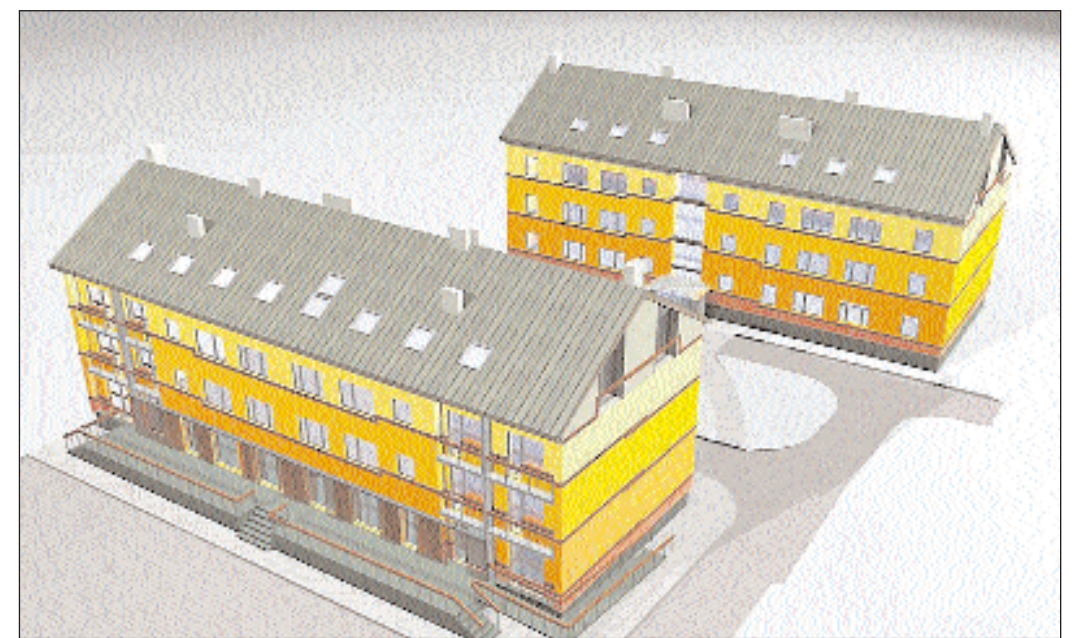
To find out more about how Hope for Latvia is helping children in Riga see next Friday's EDP2.



pretty much like any kids; a little pale and malnourished, perhaps, but well turned out, with pride in their appearance. And then you see them the next day and notice that they're wearing the same clothes... and then you go back to their homes... and see where they come from, and see their true situation.  
Seventeen-year-old Jenya Kuznecova lives in "social housing", which perhaps sounds grander than it is, as if it would be hygienic and sanitary at least. Hope for Latvia has supported her throughout her childhood and teenage years. We travel to her home in Bolderaja, in a grim apartment block like the one mentioned earlier, in a dead-end estate beside a factory that incessantly pumps dark grey smoke into the cold sky. We walk up the half-dozen dark flights of steps, down the unlit corridor and knock on a door.  
Jenya's grandmother answers, a little babushka in a headscarf, chattering away in Russian. Jenya is out at the moment but will be back soon, she says, so we pile into the tiny flat, sitting on the beds and chairs, and her grandmother jabbars away cheerily and gesticulates. Hope for Latvia's new social worker Inete Ginko translates for us, converting half a minute of rapid Russian into half a dozen words of English. "She says she is proud of Jenya... She says she works hard at school."  
Although it is a tiny space to live in, unlike many others this flat is clean and smells fresh. With £300 from Hope for Latvia, Jenya has redecorated the room. There is clean line on the floor, floral wallpaper, a desk in the corner where Jenya does her homework. Her bed is in the far corner, her grandmother's bed in the middle, and there is another single mattress where her mother sleeps when she's around and not drinking. Her uncle also stays there. As with so many of these families, the father is nowhere to be seen. For Jenya, as with many of the other boys and girls over the years, Derek and Ian have become father figures instead.  
We travel to another flat in Bolderaja, this time within a decaying wooden house rather than a concrete high-rise.

This is where Olesja Protasa lives with her parents, her sister Katja and Katja's two-year-old son Daniel.  
The lights are off, gloom and staleness hang in the air. The father works sometimes, as a mechanic, but when he has money he drinks. He is working at the moment but not being paid. Derek comments dryly that he hasn't seen him looking so healthy in a long time.  
Wherever we went the story was much the same: the parents sitting at home day by day, the dank flat lit only by the flickering blue glow of the television.  
As for the toilets, in the worst cases they are in an outside shed, often a hole in a plank of wood over a cesspit. The smell of excrement and urine hits you from metres away. I will say nothing more about their cleanliness other than that you need to watch where you step. Six families will share a toilet and washing facilities in a typical apartment block.  
The kitchen and bathroom facilities are also often shared between a number of families, each having its own light switch and light bulb so that electricity bills may be paid separately. It is common to see three lightbulbs hanging from a kitchen ceiling with three corresponding switches.  
Flick on the light, a rare luxury, and more is revealed: the grease and dirt on the walls, the soot-blackened ceiling above the flue, the ragged curtains hitched aside to reveal grimy windows.  
But in several of the flats we visited it was that smell that made the strongest impression.  
Step across the threshold and you gag. The problem with words and pictures is that they cannot convey the smell of poverty: it is a visceral stench that gets you in the gut, in a place within you that lies beyond words and makes you feel instinctively that no one should have to live like this.  
It is ironic that people exist in these conditions only a stone's throw from where hordes of British holidaymakers gather every weekend to drink cheap beer. Since a budget airline introduced

cheap flights to Riga, it has become a favourite destination for stag parties, and the beautiful architecture of Riga's historic city centre is also a strong draw for tourists. Leave the old town and head for the nearby suburbs and it is a very different story.  
When Latvia joined the EU and Nato 18 months ago along with its neighbours Lithuania and Estonia, this had the effect of making British people think the country must have a similar standard of living to what we would expect.  
Derek says: "One of the perceptions in England is that because this country is now in the EU, people think there's all this money splashing around, so they think 'what's the problem?'"  
The problem is that EU membership has brought wild inflation to an economically weak country. The price of property has gone up by 45pc in the last 12 months. The way in which prices have rocketed is demonstrated by the land that Isaiah House will be built upon.  
"The piece of land has gone up from £25,000 to £200,000 in three years," says Derek.  
"It's a great piece of land. We bought it for £25,000 and were kicking ourselves because a few years before that we could have bought it for £5,000."  
There is in fact plenty of money in Latvia but it appears that the rich are getting richer while the poor get poorer. Since gaining its independence it has been seeking inward investment and most of its industries have been privatised. Much of the money coming in is Russian. There are Porsche showrooms, a noticeably high number of Bentley cars on the streets, and Armani shops... but most people are earning around £200 a month.  
WITH ALL THIS HAS COME A SHOCKING RISE IN THE COST OF LIVING, while wages have stayed the same. This has sent the standard of living in an already impoverished country into freefall.  
About 30,000 people are looking for places to live but prices are growing: housing prices are almost on a par with



HOPE FOR LATVIA: (Clockwise from left) One of the children from Riga being helped by Norfolk-based charity Hope For Latvia. One of the blocks of flats. A dirty and unhygienic kitchen in a family's flat. A filthy toilet shed shared by several Latvian families. Architects' impressions of how the completed Isaiah development will look.

what we would pay in Britain, meaning that many families have no chance of buying a home.  
"It has been a huge change in a very short time," says Derek. "When we started the project we were talking about half a million pounds, and now it's £1.25m."  
"When I first came here in the early 1990s it was very oppressive. It was dark. I found one restaurant in Riga, one bar, and you could count the cars on the road.  
"I could see a country struggling to come to terms with its independence. The levels of poverty were dire. Some years after that I saw the first Coca-Cola sign go up... and it has been followed by pornography, nightclub signs, drugs. The alcoholism was here before the west arrived."  
Fifteen years on Hope for Latvia has established itself as a vital part of the lives of many young people in Riga, but there is much more to be done.  
"Pound Out Poverty week begins on February 3; advertising posters will be appearing near you soon and later in the year there will be a fundraising dinner at the Assembly House in Norwich geared towards making Isaiah House a reality.  
The name comes from the Book of Isaiah in the Bible. Chapter 58, verse 12 states: "Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings."  
Hope for Latvia is a Christian charity and Derek believes it is his calling to help

HOW TO HELP

To make a donation to Hope for Latvia you can make a payment into this HSBC bank account: Hope for Latvia: account number 61140914, sort code 40-35-06.  
Or post a cheque payable to Hope for Latvia to: Isaiah House, PO Box 1074, Norwich NR11 6ZL.  
Or donate online by going to www.isaiahhouse.co.uk and clicking on Donations.

people in poverty in Latvia. He has visited the country 45 times since the early 1990s, having first travelled there as a result of running his graphic design business. When I visited I travelled with Derek, Tim Foster and Andrew Morton, all from Aylsham, and Ian, from Holt. All have been to Riga numerous times in order to help the children and families and, in the past four years, develop the Isaiah House project.  
"About four years ago Ian and I were walking around Riga and we thought 'We have got to do something more - we are not solving the problem, just managing the problem'. We hope that this will break the cycle."  
In the face of such widespread desperation it is almost tempting to turn away and say it is a bigger problem than we can begin to address, so what's the use in even trying? Ian, who works as a barrister at East Anglian Chambers in Norwich, has a good argument in favour of doing something to help.  
"There's a story," he says, "of a man walking along a beach one morning and he sees that the tide has washed up hundreds and hundreds of starfish - they're everywhere, all along the beach. And so the man begins picking them up and throwing back into the sea, one by one.  
"Another guy comes along and says: 'Don't bother, there's too many, you'll never make a difference.'  
"And the first man picks up another starfish, throws it back into the sea, and says: 'I made a difference to that one.'  
"You can make a difference to the children of Latvia by giving whatever you can afford - anything is better than nothing. It may only be a little to you but it will mean a lot to them.  
■ For more information about the fundraising dinner call Derek Blois on 01263 732237 (evenings), 01263 734198 (daytime) or 07775 606661.  
■ See www.isaiahhouse.co.uk, www.hopeforlatvia.co.uk and www.helpproject.org.uk for more info.