

EUROPEAN BVS PROJECT REPORT FORM – fall 2017

BVS project: **L'Arche Belfast**

Location: **Belfast, Northern Ireland**

Reported by: **Two current BVS volunteers**

1) In your own words, tell us what your project does.

L'Arche is an international organization working with adults with intellectual disabilities - people with and without disabilities working and living together - and promoting independence in everyday life. Every L'Arche community has houses where core members (the adults with intellectual disabilities) and some volunteers live together. Support staff and volunteers work on shift and help with everyday life. L'Arche does its best to work with and alongside the core members to promote and help them to be as independent as possible. Every L'Arche community has different projects and events.

The project gives support for independent living for adults with intellectual disabilities.

Our L'Arche has 5 different projects. The first one is called Root Soup where adults with and without disabilities make food for others to eat. They cater, they serve in the church across the street, they work at the homeless hostel, and much more. <http://www.rootsoup.co.uk/>

The second is called In Other Words. This is an art group where people get together and work on art projects, draw, express themselves through art, and hang out in a safe atmosphere. <http://www.larchebelfast.org.uk/about-us/in-other-words/>

The third project is called Green Buds. This is our garden group where we work at an allotment called Vista every Friday for the experience of growing and harvesting vegetables and fruits through rain, sun, and snow. We also have chickens!!! <http://www.larchebelfast.org.uk/about-us/green-buds/>

The 4th is Grow Cook Cater. This is a course for ages 18 to 30 to develop skills in the kitchen and outdoors. <http://www.larchebelfast.org.uk/grow-cook-cater/>

The 5th and final project is called Community Growth. It is another garden project helping people learn how to grow and harvest their own vegetables and fruits. <http://www.larchebelfast.org.uk/community-growth/>

What do you do there?

I work in one of our two current houses, the Hearth house. I am a reference person for one of the core members. I help her with planning, finances when she needs it, organization, and any visions or problems she may have. When I am on shift I help out in the house with the core members' routines, cleaning, planning, or anything that is needed to be done. I also work with Green Buds on Fridays and will start to work with Community Growth on Wednesdays.

I give support and care to individuals who live within the L'Arche Belfast community and also for individuals who live outside of the community but who participate with L'Arche.

2) What prerequisites does a volunteer need for this placement?

You need to be over 18 (for BVSers: over 21). *Patience and good observation and listening skills. Being flexible and adaptable.*

What would be useful, but not absolutely necessary?

It helps to have experience working with people who have an intellectual disability, or experience living in a community setting.

What else should a BVSer know before choosing this project?

You need to be willing to live and work in the same house; you have to be willing to live with people with and without intellectual disabilities. You need to have an open mind and be willing to be open and vulnerable. You need to be okay with doing personal care routines.

What advice or preparation would be helpful?

Be willing to be open, willing to solve any problems, and to admit faults. Your life will change positively after working in L'Arche if you're open to it!

*To read the history of L'Arche, 'Jean Vanier'. To watch the YouTube videos: the 'As I am' series.
To read about the regional and local history of Northern Ireland.*

Was there an additional application process?

You will have skype interviews with the volunteer coordinator. *You have to apply for a visa, because Northern Ireland is part of the UK; if staying longer than one year, you need to travel back to the USA to apply for a new 12-month visa.*

3) Please describe the personnel structure; who is who?

L'Arche has an international board, regional boards and a board for each L'Arche. We have people who work in our Belfast L'Arche office. We have a community leader, a house leader for every house, an admin for every house, staff (support workers) and volunteers. Every work project also has their own set of staff and volunteers.

The director was one of the original founders of the community in 2001. There are two community houses, the Ember which started in 2001 and supports 5 core members and the Hearth which opened in 2013 and houses four core members. Within each house there is a house leader and house administrator, paid staff and volunteers.

Describe your job supervision.

I received an initial induction which included what my duties would be, information with regards to routines of core members and the community and I have been provided with training, such as fire safety, health and safety, moving and handling, handling of medication, safe guarding of vulnerable adults, management of aggressive behavior. I receive supervision every three months with my house leader and an annual appraisal which is provided by my house team.

4) What are your working hours?

I work around 40 hours a week and sometimes volunteer more hours to the projects or house.

It is a 40 hour working week, 6 hours of which are during an overnight shift once a week; you are not required to be awake during your overnight shift but to be present in case you're needed.

You will be scheduled for an overnight once a week as well. That is just to stay the night in the house in case of an emergency. Meaning if you're on overnight you are responsible for getting people out in a fire or taking care of ones needs if anything were to happen. You can sleep of course.

How is the day/week structured?

Mondays through to Friday, a regular shift begins at 7.30am – 10am, supporting core members with their morning routines; breakfast, teeth brushing, discussing the day ahead. After core members have left for the day staff will clean the house, carpets, kitchen and toilets.

Free time is from 10am-3pm, shift begins again from 3pm-10pm, during this period we focus on meal preparation, and an assistant will support core members to prepare a communal dinner every night. Assisting with laundry, room cleaning, bedtime routines and socializing in activities and outings. Saturdays, Sundays and holidays start at 9am-10pm with a one hour break during the day which is very flexible. If the core members are off for a bank holiday or regular holiday or whatever then the shift will be 9A.M. to 10P.M. like on a weekend.

The weekends are usually full of social events or outings that core members like to participate in such as birthday parties, church events, craft fairs, drives to local beauty spots, sporting events, cinema, theatre. Monday mornings from 10am-12 is the house meeting for staff to discuss core members' weeks and any planning that may be needed.

Tuesday morning from 10-12 is house formation which can include training, team or community discussion/ reflection, community activity, coffee at a local café or a house and garden clean-up.

What are the expectations about working hours, time commitment?

Be present. You can use your phone but don't be on it constantly and never during dinner. Be attentive to the core members needs and to what is going on within the day.

You're expected to be present for your shift and to help whatever work needs completed. Starting and finishing times can be very flexible to your needs.

Is there a different summer schedule or summer activities at your project?

There are activities during the summer. The hours are the same. If you want to join in activities there are plenty of opportunities. *Just core members and staff are taking summer holidays. You may be asked to attend a holiday with a core member, it is not compulsory to say yes. There is a 'summer scheme', a two week summer day camp which the community organizes with the local church.*

What amount of vacation do you get per year?

You get 28 holiday days. ...which can be taken in increments. *The holidays can be worked into your days off so that you can have much more free time than your set 28 days.*

What holidays (national or religious, etc.) are taken at your project? *All traditional holidays are recognized and celebrated while still providing supported living to core members throughout the entire year. During holidays core members are more likely to be home, this responsibility is shared between all staff and volunteers.*

5) **Is there a "dress code" at your project?** No; it is casual dress, keep it functional.

What kinds of clothes are acceptable for the BVSer to wear to work?

As long as they are appropriate and modest you can wear anything you want.

What is the climate like; what kinds of clothing should a new BVSer bring along to this region? Is there anything else one should bring?

Cloudy and rainy most of the time. Can be nice and sunny. Bring a rain jacket, it does get cold in winter so a winter jacket is useful but it doesn't snow often and doesn't get to or below 0 degrees Fahrenheit ever. Average winter is around 40 degrees Fahrenheit, it can get colder, the coldest ever in Belfast was almost 0 Fahrenheit. In the summer the average is around 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Doesn't get above 80 very often if at all. Bring plenty of jackets. Also if you have a hot water bottle bring it.

Make sure you bring light rain clothing. The summer is very mild usually 15-25C, the winter does not get cold in but it can feel very cold due to the moisture in the atmosphere, remember to bring wet gear, hat, gloves, sweaters, swimming shorts, good walking shoes, if you need something while here you can usually get cheaply in a charity shop.

6) What/how are your living arrangements?

The first year I lived in the house I work in (the Hearth). I enjoyed it very much and made an effort to be around when I was off as well to create more of a home environment. This was good for me and for the core members as well as the staff team. I just had to separate being on from being off sometimes. Typically L'Arche wants the volunteers to live in the houses where the core members live before moving to the volunteer house, the Ark. Currently I live in the Ark. We get a food stipend and do all our own cleaning.

You would normally be asked to move into your own room within one of the core members' houses, to live and work there for up to a year depending on the needs of the house, this is to allow the new volunteer to have a truly immersive experience and to become acquainted with the core members and the community. Most volunteers have the option to move to the volunteer house 'the Ark' if room is available after around 6 months, some people chose to stay living within the main house. If you would like to extend or decrease your stay within the core members' house this can be discussed and a solution found.

Do you live alone or with others?

I live with other people. There are between 2 and 5 of us at all times depending on how many volunteers are at L'Arche at the time. There are always two volunteers living in the Ember (the first core member house) and 1 volunteer living in the Hearth.(the second core member house) Soon there will be a third house where there will be one or two volunteers living. *You are always within the community, either in the core members' or the volunteers' house. At the moment I work with and share the Ark with one other volunteer.*

Do you live and work with the same people?

Some volunteers in the Ark are working in the Ember and some in the Hearth.

7) What is the smoking/no smoking policy at your project workplace? At your housing?

You can smoke outside the back of the house. You can smoke when you want as long as nothing pressing is happening. *There is a designated smoking area at the work place; you are allowed to manage your own smoking habit. You can smoke outside but not inside.*

8) Do you do any other volunteering besides your official project?

I will volunteer for the garden when I'm off sometimes and for activities in L'Arche sometimes. I work every Friday in the garden as part of my hours and sometimes on my off days I volunteer because I love it. I volunteer for activities to be involved more in the community.

I volunteer with 'Root Soup', this is a catering project within the community, they give cooking lessons to core members and other participants with learning disabilities and individuals from a local homeless

shelter. Root Soup provides lunches for 3 local churches, and two lunches at a local homeless hostel which provides support for people in transition. I'm interested in planning, preparing, serving food. I love the people who are involved with Root Soup; I enjoy being involved in the catering aspect, providing food for functions and community events.

9) Is your project faith-based? Yes

Is it connected to a particular church or denomination?

L'Arche's roots are in the Roman Catholic tradition and internationally it has become ecumenical and interfaith. L'Arche Belfast is ecumenical Christian.

If so, does it require you to attend its worship services or any others? *No.* It is not a requirement to be faith based. You do not need to participate in services if you do not want to. If you are willing to support the core members in their faith journey it is a plus. Some go to church and some don't.

Do you have other opportunities for church attendance?

There are many Protestant and Catholic churches in Belfast. If church is part of your life you can probably find one to suit you. There are also prayers and reflections in L'Arche and you can choose to go or not to go.

10) What kinds of social/outside-of-work activities are available?

Belfast is a city and has a lot to offer. There are lots of festivals, art shows, charity shops, good pub scene, and much to do. You can find lots of different things to do. *Pub quizzes, local theatre, cinema, hiking, trips to the local beaches, trips to regional attractions. Traditional pub culture.*

Are local adult-education courses available? Yes.

11) How much is your weekly or monthly financial support?

The stipend (pocket money) starts at 145 pounds and will go up to 165 pounds a month.

12) What should one know about this town/area/country?

It would be beneficial to look up Belfast, Northern Ireland, the Troubles, the peace process (Good Friday Agreement) to get a sense of the culture. It's nice to know but not the same as the experience you will get living here and learning here. *The people are very welcoming and friendly, giving any help or information you may need. Belfast is a university and tourist town, a town of diversity, with a population of around 300,000 (Belfast city)/600,000 (metropolitan area). English is the main language but with strong regional accents; the people have a very good sense of humor and getting to know someone would likely involve going for a drink and a chat.*

What resources do you recommend in preparation? <https://www.larche.org/web-series> -- "Google Larry" is starring our own Larry Gurley from L'Arche Belfast. You will work with him if you come here so watching the video would be beneficial.

Look up the L'Arche Belfast website: <https://www.larchebelfast.org.uk/> Any books about L'Arche or by Jean Vanier or Henry Nouwen would be nice but again not necessary.

14) In your opinion, is this project suited for a married couple? Yes

For an older BVSer? Yes. *I'm an older BVSer and I have found that age is not a factor in the work we do and experience is welcomed.*

For a BVSer with a disability? Yes. *A mild to moderate disability has been and is currently no barrier to participating; the houses are old and Victorian in style with a lot of stairs and not wheelchair accessible, this needs to be a consideration.*

15) What will always be vague or difficult about this project, in your opinion? *Because you work with adults with learning disabilities you may experience both physically and emotionally challenging behaviors.*

If you could, what might you change about your project? Why? *I wouldn't really change anything, I can talk to or get support from my supervisors or friends, we're always changing and adapting.*

What do you like most about the project?

The work. I love getting to know everyone and it feels like a family. The connections I've made are priceless and irreplaceable. *The people I work for and the people I work with.*

Would you recommend this project to future BVSers? Why or why not?

Yes, it is an amazing organization and is a great place to self-reflect and grow as a person. *YES, it's a good project, located on a wonderful island, the people are great.*