

Team Solihull

Updates from

Sri Lanka

February and March 2024



SOLIHULL





Our first visit was to Kokkavil, a large village where 60 families live in challenging conditions & ramshackle, temporary dwellings.



Through Team Solihull funding, Assist RR has constructed five water wells in recent months. Here's one of the large domestic water wells, with further progress being made to build a toilet for each family. Until recently, none of the families had any ablutions.



This is one of beneficiary families we met who shared how the water well has allowed them to drink, wash & cook without travelling long distances to collect water. They expressed their enormous thanks to those who have helped them- the wells have been life changing.



Team Solihull Updates from Sri Lanka #1



We've also travelled to a remote island off Kayts in the far north of Sri Lanka. Daily boats travel from this jetty to each of the marginalised islands, where conditions are harsh & rudimentary.



We visited a coastal village on Analaitivu Island where Team Solihull has funded clean, safe, desalinated water for 33 families & the village school. These families have never had access to running drinking water before and previously relied on a distant water well. There are still many more families on the island we hope to support in the oncoming months.



The families welcomed us with great excitement and in their finest clothes to a special ceremony to light the Kuru Vilaku & expressed their deep appreciation for the support Team Solihull & Assist RR have given to them. It's been wonderful to see how the support of our school community has had, a very direct and lasting impact on their lives.

Thank you all.



Team Solihull Updates from Sri Lanka #2



Our visit to Kalmunai Base Hospital saw the official opening of a newly cordoned, high dependency paediatric unit funded by Team Solihull's paediatric ward appeal.



The six bed ward now provides a separate air conditioned area for critical & acute care for babies & all children up to the age of 14.



Many children from the surrounding areas will benefit from the renovation in this apex hospital.



The hospital has an incredibly warm & proactive culture and the staff are truly committed to providing the best care for sick children & their parents.



We also visited the village of Thirukkivil near the south east coast where Team Solihull have funded drinking water taps for 20 families.



These families previously relied on common water wells, but the water has become contaminated with manganese & sediment, making the water largely only useable for toilet flushing and crop irrigation.



Having running, clean water has been life changing for these families.



Not only has accessible clean, running water had inevitable health benefits, but families were keen to tell us that they were also grateful to be able to clean their clothes properly. As you can see here, they are very appreciative and happy! 😊



These young boys were keen to toast your good health with a cup of clean drinking water. Cheers!



Jaffna Teaching Hospital - Cataract Camp

Leaving Vavuniya, a steamy early morning on the A30 gave way to dry red earth and pockmarked roads that urged us onwards to the district of Mannar on the north-west coast.

Driving there in half the time would have been possible, if it wasn't for the cows, antiquated bicycles, and swarms of brightly coloured tuk-tuks that ambled nonchalantly, as they do on every road in Sri Lanka.

When we reached our pick up point in Murungan, we met with district health officials who used their outreach clinics to bring together 53 very poor villagers and to put them, and us, on a very pink bus.



It was a bit early for sensory overload, but it happened regardless. The driver sat amid hanging gardens; whilst disco lighting, blaring Bollywood soundtracks and a very loud horn that sounded like a clown's hooter, welcomed us all onboard before our we trundled our way to Jaffna mostly without braking.



Many of the blind or half blind passengers were heading to the north's biggest city for the very first time, carrying a large chunk of their worldly possessions in just one or two bags for an overnight stay at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital. They would all have their cataracts removed the next day, preventing or reversing their blindness.

Something very special is happening across Sri Lanka and we had the privilege of seeing up close, a shining example of how extraordinarily effective and transformative this public-private charitable partnership is proving to be.



Dr Malavaran, and other surgeons, across Sri Lanka are leading lights in tackling head-on the cataract issues which besiege Sri Lanka; compounded by long post-pandemic backlogs, particularly high incidences of diabetes and the collapse of the economy.

Guiding his team with vision, passion and unbridled commitment to helping those who will otherwise never have the means to save their own sight, Dr Malavaran had clearly thought through all the moving parts with such attention to detail, that the process hummed in synchronicity.



Screening teams reached those in the rural and urban areas, tracking and transporting them through to arrival at the hospital, where they then moved through a series of administrative and ophthalmology stations, before having their cataracts removed under local anaesthetic the following day.



It's the scale and scope of intervention that gives this project its very real wow factor. Cataract camps now see teams of surgeons and staff, working together in tandem, performing as many as 1,200 surgeries in ten days, making a big dent in the preventable blindness figures and getting those people back on their feet, living independently and in most cases contributing to the economy directly or indirectly.



Using Ministry of Health hospitals, surgeons, medical staff, administrators, support staff, catering staff, district officials and even army volunteers, the practised mechanisms of the public sector blend with the private philanthropy of two Malaysia based foundations - Alaka and Ananda, who now fund the lenses and consumables through the UK and Sri Lanka based charity, Assist RR. These items are otherwise often unavailable in government hospitals due to the current economic crisis.



In 2021, Team Solihull raised funds for two wonderful charities to implement cataract surgeries in Sri Lanka and this proved to be a catalyst for the arrival of the exceptional philanthropic support from Malaysia.

Both charities have continued their commitment to saving sight and last year Assist RR UK (23,000 +) and IMHO USA (2000 +) made outstanding progress in implementing over 25,000 surgeries, in 26 hospitals, with over 35 truly dedicated surgeons, including three Indian surgeons who volunteered their services through the Indian Consulate. These surgeries took place all over Sri Lanka. As well as Jaffna; hospitals in Vavuniya, Kalmunai, Sammanthurai, Ratnapura, Chilaw and the National Eye Hospital in Colombo, to name but a few, have all run large scale cataract camps using a similar blueprint and many other hospitals have also reduced their waiting lists steadily through daily surgery programmes using these funds.

More and more hospitals and surgeons are making use of the Alaka and Ananda funds and, now that the scale and structures are established, it is hoped that at least another 25,000 cataract surgeries can take place in the first six months of 2024.



This is a photo of Sugumaar – a 48-year-old builder's labourer from Jaffna. He hasn't been able to work for the last six months. When we asked him who supported him when he had no work, he told us that nobody was able to so he had to borrow to feed himself and his family. He is now happy to be earning money again.



This is Tahirra Umma, a grandmother from Mannar. She has been blind for over five years and when her husband died last year, she had to move in with her daughter, Rameeza, because she was unable to live independently. Having had her cataract removed in just one eye (the second eye will be done in the near future) she is most looking forward to seeing the faces of Rameeza's seven children for the first time in years, to helping her daughter cook for them when they get home and to reading the Qur'an.



Big problems need a big response, so in mapping out a blueprint that can be replicated across Sri Lanka, and in other countries, these amazing surgeons, charities and philanthropic funds, are building a legacy as big as the one which restores the sight of so many who would otherwise become or remain blind. Teams in Myanmar, Laos and Aaravind Eye Hospital in India have taken a keen interest and want to find out more.

Spending time with the 120 beneficiaries (53 from Mannar & 67 from Jaffna) at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital that day and seeing up close the magnificent staff that cared for them, was a snapshot of the wonderful work that is happening across the island.



There have already been over 25,000 good news stories like Sugumaar's and Tahirra's to celebrate and here's to over 25,000 more. Big pink party buses are entirely optional but a standing ovation for all those who make this happen is a must.

Sending our warmest wishes from afar,

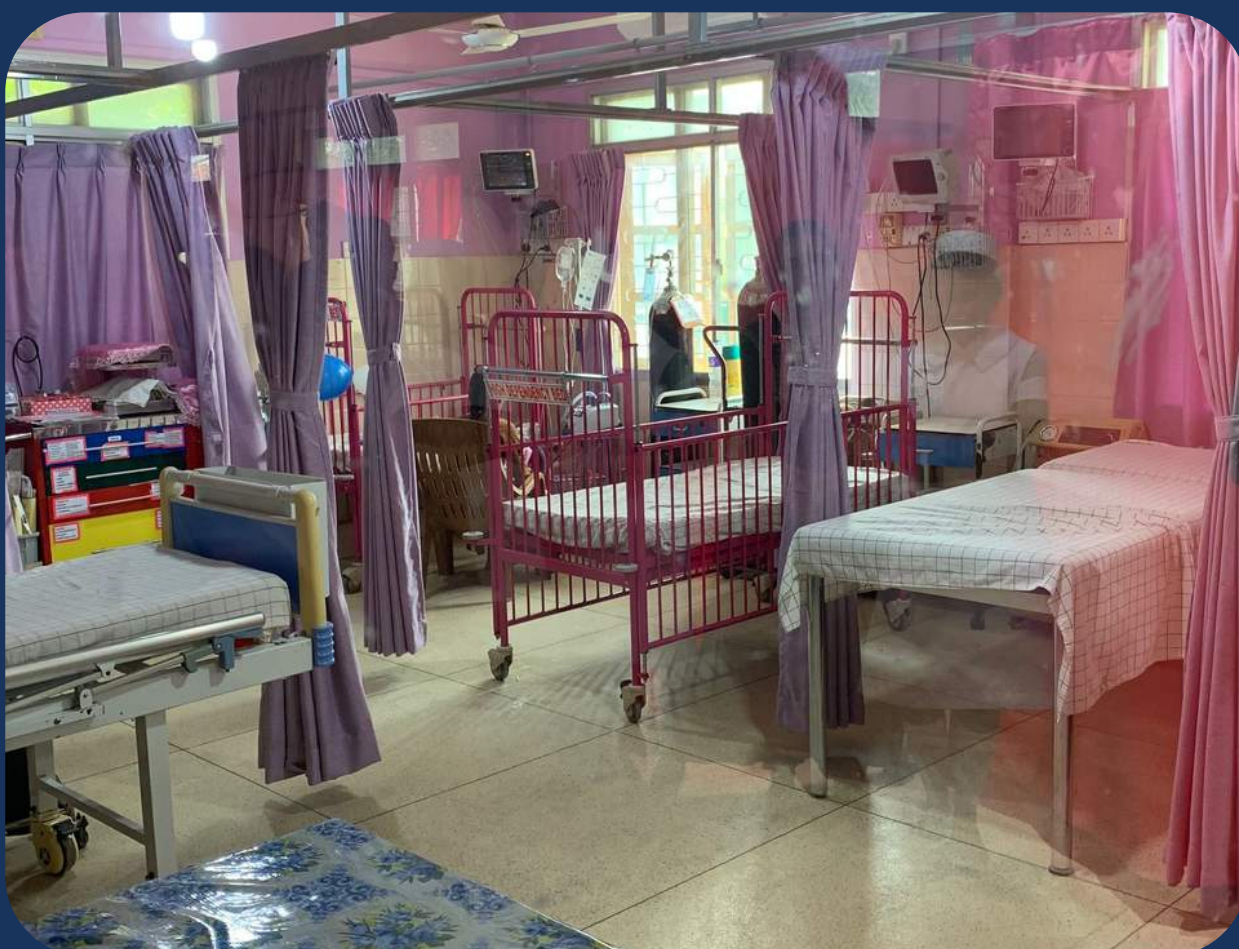
Mark & Donna Penney



We visited Batticaloa Teaching Hospital where a newly refurbished paediatric high dependency unit, funded by all those who sponsored our recent Ultra Challenge Teams, was officially opened.



The hospital is the destination point for an area that serves over 600,000 people. The team of doctors and nurses asked that we send their heartfelt thanks to all those who had a hand in creating this much needed bespoke space for acute & critically ill children.



The unit now offers six beds with privacy screens and oxygen lines, a resuscitation unit, fans & air conditioning and new furniture, improving the care the staff can offer extremely sick children.



Our school's long-standing commitment to funding cataract camps has saved the sight of thousands of Sri Lanka's poorest people. We first met Dr Dias in Mullaitivu in 2016 and were again privileged to be in theatre with him in Sammanthurai recently. He travelled overnight from the capital Colombo, with his team - all of whom gave their time freely for the benefit of others. Starting at 4.30am, Dr Dias completed 110 surgeries in one day. He is legendary in these parts!



Meet Fatimah, who used to have cataracts in both eyes. Her first one was removed using Team Solihull funds in October 22 & we were delighted to meet her on the day she had her second one removed. It's hard to express in words how grateful she was to be given back the gift of sight at the age of 33. The cost of her surgery this time - less than \$30.



That day another 110 patients, who would never otherwise have the means to afford to fund their own operations, had their cataracts removed and their eyesight fully restored.



The Upcountry of Sri Lanka, a large area blanketed with lush tea plantations, is picture postcard perfect.



Yet amongst the verdant hills, live many of the country's most disenfranchised people. Swathes of the Indian Tamil plantation communities are bound by inescapable poverty - earning less than £50 a month is barely enough to get by, and not nearly enough to move on from.



Half of the £67,000 raised by Team Solihull on its Windsor Ultra Challenge was ring fenced for IMHO USA to provide clean water for the most marginalised plantation settlements. On the Shannon Tea Estate, the families live at the end of a long dirt track, often impassable in the rainy season. IMHO have installed a clean water supply on our behalf for the 180 villagers who live there.



This is where they used to get their water from - a 300-metre uphill walk from their homes. The water is contaminated with pesticide and fertiliser. It's clearly unsafe to drink and used to cause a range of health issues, all of them avoidable and many of them serious.



The children of the village are very proud of their new water supply, and it is appreciated enormously by the families. Team Solihull funding will now also provide individual running water taps to each of the 29 families in the village and IMHO will install these very soon.



Another project IMHO has implemented is the provision of clean water to 80 plantation families on the nearby St Andrew's Tea Estate. The community have been without a clean water supply for over 16 years.



Team Solihull Updates from Sri Lanka #5



A 10,000 litre tank, and a number of additional 5,000 litre tanks, and pumps, now supply over 500 people in need of a reliable and continuous source of safe drinking water.



By ingeniously building a small dam above the habitation line, fresh water from the hills is now harnessed, stored and distributed year-round, providing an indefinite clean water source for the plantation families.



This little girl said she likes knowing the water she drinks is safe and that she won't get poorly from drinking dirty water and have to miss school anymore. ❤️💧



Nestled on the hillside in the shadow of Adam's Peak, is Mousakellie School with 290 pupils aged 6-16 years on roll. It's hard to imagine a more beautiful setting for a school, albeit one that until recently didn't have a supply of uncontaminated drinking water.



IMHO have used Team Solihull funds to drill a deep well by the entrance to the school grounds, incorporate a pump system and install seven taps around the school, distributing fresh, clean drinking water for the children.



Attendance and general health have improved, and the 16 staff members now experience a lot less urinary tract infections.



Despite the poverty that prevails, the families here take great pride in their children turning up to school each day in sparkling white uniforms. As is so often the case here and elsewhere, education is the only pathway out of a life of poverty.



With unlimited access to clean drinking water, the children are now hydrated and learning better.



They, and we, want to send heartfelt thanks to all those who donated to this project and, of course, to IMHO for the wonderful work they have done on these communities' behalf.





Team Solihull Updates from Sri Lanka #6



The other half of Team Solihull's Clean Water Project funds are being rolled out across the north and east of Sri Lanka by Assist RR, who are leading on a wide variety of implementations, as seen here, in collaboration with the National Water Supply & Drainage Board.



For example, in the eastern town of Mullaitivu, we visited 5 of the 15 schools that have been connected to the main water supply using Team Solihull funds – ranging from preschool to A Level students.



Sports Day was in full flow when we arrived at Kalkappadu GTM Primary School. In 34°C heat, it was great to see so many quenching their thirst with clean drinking water.



Additionally, the Bharathy Child Development Centre is home for young girls aged between 8 and 23 years who have either lost both parents or who are unable to live at home due to safeguarding concerns. The 105 residents and staff now have access to clean running water too.



Dilly Pre-School celebrated the official opening of their water supply with us too, and even those working and living along the same road also share their new reliable water source. This supply has proved to be a big hit with even more people than we anticipated.



Huraisa Pre-School also welcomed us with great excitement and the children were very keen to show us their new tap.



They were also very keen to tell us all about it - even if we didn't understand a word they were saying!



And finally, Mullaitivu Maha School's 700 students now have mains connected, clean water on tap for the first time. Across the 15 beneficiary schools, 1496 students and 116 teachers are now benefiting from an unlimited supply of clean drinking water. The total connection costs for all amounted to just £1326, or 82p per person.



We also visited the impoverished village of Puththur in the north, near Jaffna, to see further shining examples of how well the Water Board, Assist RR & the villagers themselves have made very cost-effective use of Team Solihull funds.



With the villagers providing the labour to lay the pipes, we were able to supply 68 homesteads with clean drinking water. The cost for each connection and materials was £35.



These sisters have never had running water whilst caring for their bedbound and paralysed father. The girls' mother (to the left) is a labourer, and the sole income earner. They are doing their best to help break out of the poverty cycle by studying for their A-levels and the water supply is a great relief and comfort to them all.



Everyone we met wanted us to share their thanks with you all, and we in turn want to thank Assist RR and Dr Sarveswaran (former Solihull School parent), Henry Amalraj (Engineer) and the Water Board for the wonderful, life-changing work being done.





This day began with an invitation from the Vice Chancellor of Vavuniya University to discuss the launch of a pilot study into the benefits of the wider cataract surgery programme that Team Solihull has supported. Assessing the wellbeing and economic benefits of the free surgeries for those individuals, their families, their communities, and the national purse are worth exploring in depth.



From there we journeyed to the northeast to meet the Eye Team at Mullaitivu Hospital. Their passion and commitment to identifying patients who need their cataracts removed shone through, as they sent another bus load north to Jaffna. They have made a significant dent in the post-pandemic waiting list across their region, in partnership with Dr Malavaran and the Alaka and Ananda Foundations.



The mode of transport on this occasion? A big blue party bus - Johnson's Coaches take note!



Whilst many of the patients were inevitably nervous about having their operation; friends & lasting bonds were made as they supported one another through their sight restoration journey.



In the operating theatre, Dr Malavaran and his team worked with skill, precision and dexterity. The level of focus and pace required to deliver this service to such a high level was something to behold.



Two surgeons operated simultaneously on their patients, whilst two further patients were prepped, ready in waiting. This practised system of each surgeon alternating between two operating beds again ensured the successful completion of over 100 cataract operations in one day.



With each operation typically lasting less than 10 minutes, each of the very poor and vulnerable patients had their lives transformed for the better.



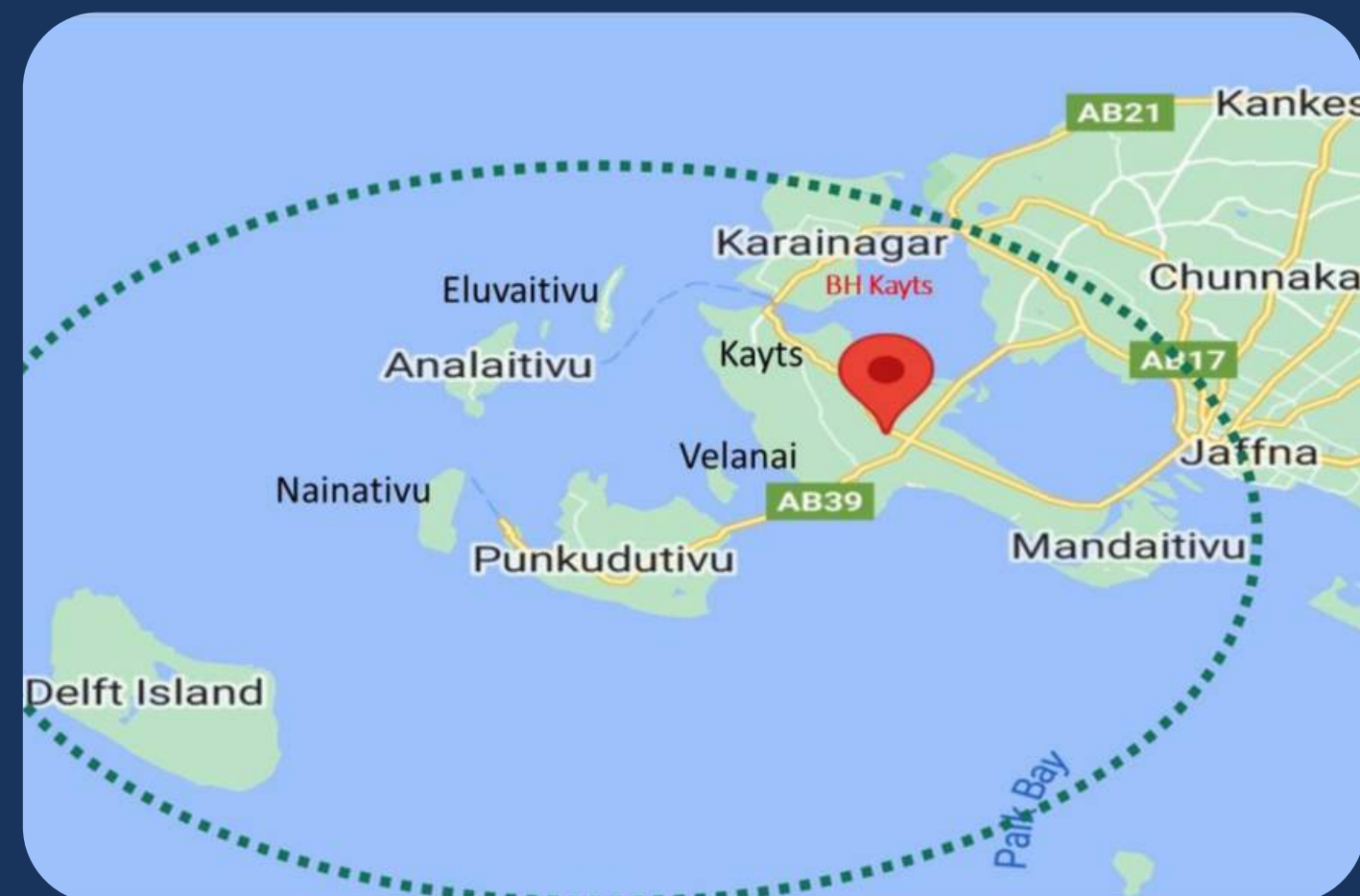
This woman, accompanied and chaperoned by her daughter, arrived at the hospital anxious, unsmiling, and very unsure. She had bilateral cataracts and couldn't walk unaccompanied. This is the moment she saw the world for the first time in many years. These are emotional moments for all present.



The patients made their way back to their villages, taking with them all the benefits their newfound sight gives them. Being present on such days is a privilege and our admiration for the teams and donors who make it all possible, could not be greater. The gift of sight is surely one of the greatest gifts of all.



Further to the upgrading of the high dependency units of the paediatric wards in hospitals in Batticaloa and Kalmunai, in the east of Sri Lanka, we're delighted to share with you that Kayts Base Hospital (KBH) has been identified as the beneficiary of our major new build.



At the centre of seven islands off the coast of Jaffna, it is the designated apex hospital for the whole of the island catchment area. This means referrals come from seven Divisional Hospitals and one Primary Medical Care Unit.



On February 20th we visited the site and met with Dr Tishany Seralathan, KBH's Medical Superintendent, and her team to assess both the hospital's paediatric demands and its facilities.



With a catchment area population of 43,000 and a paediatric population of circa 9000, the services of its sole paediatric consultant at KBH are in high demand. The majority of admittances are for respiratory problems and malnutrition, with most islanders living well below the poverty line.



Structurally, the current paediatric ward is in bad shape and the fabric of the building is in poor condition. The roof and the pillars holding it up, are a cause for concern.



The toilets are close to being unusable. The inside walls are showing signs of advanced deterioration...



Team Solihull Updates from Sri Lanka #8



and the outside walls are even worse. As a result, many meetings and discussions have taken place over the last month, and we're delighted to share this latest development with you.

Overview



This new ward will now be built at KBH. It will be built in loving memory of Sonya Lynch, a paediatric nurse from Cork, Ireland and funded by her family and friends, IMHO USA, Assist RR UK and the community of Solihull School.



Huge thanks to all who sponsored the ultra-challenge-takers in making this possible. The dedicated team of medics at KBH will soon have the facilities they need to care for sick children, for decades to come. You have facilitated something very special.

Thank you!





Team Solihull

Parting Update from Sri Lanka



Team Solihull took shape when a team of staff, pupils and parents - past and present - took on a 55KM Cotswold Way Challenge, in June 2021. The beneficiaries that time were over 2,300 very poor Sri Lankans, whose blindness was either prevented or reversed.



In April 2023, the next Team Solihull tackled the Easter 50 Ultra Challenge around Windsor to raise funds which provided access to clean drinking water for thousands of school children, villagers, and tea plantation workers around the country.



And in January 2024, Team Solihull mastered the Winter Walk Ultra Challenge around central London; this time to upgrade or build paediatric facilities in the east and north of Sri Lanka. Assist RR UK and IMHO USA have done a wonderful job at driving our projects and making sure that 100% of all donations went straight to those who need it most.



Team Solihull Parting Update from Sri Lanka



The geographical reach and life-changing benefits for so many of Sri Lanka's poorest people is a challenge to convey in words, so here's just some of those we met on our travels, all of whom have something to say. From school children in the Central Province,



to tea plantation workers



& their families in the
Upcountry...



Team Solihull Parting Update from Sri Lanka



from infant preschoolers



& primary school children in
the northeast,



to teenagers in the Northern
Province...



Team Solihull Parting Update from Sri Lanka



from those on the west
coast whose sight has been
saved,



to the elders of the
northern islands



& children on the east coast;
they all want to say one
heartfelt thing to all who
supported them...

Mikka Nandri (மிக்க நன்றி)
Bohoma Sthuthi (பொஹொம சீதுதி)

*Thank you
very much!*

