

Letter to CVT Trustees from Delrow Group: July 19, 2014

We write to you as relatives of the Trust's beneficiaries at the Delrow Community. Forgive the length of this letter but we feel you need to be informed.

The charity, which as Trustees you have a fiduciary duty to protect, finds itself in an extremely difficult situation. Relatives are at odds with CVT management. The wider Camphill movement, both in the UK and overseas, is increasingly troubled about what is happening at CVT communities. Angry relatives are lobbying MPs and ministers. The dispute is going public. Urgent action is now needed to avoid reputational damage to our charity.

This letter is not intended to bypass management, with whom we have been communicating for months. No doubt you will have seen our exchanges and the Chair or Chief Executive will have briefed you on our latest letter, sent on 3d July.

But you may be thinking: "Why are these people so upset?" Allow us to explain.

Our case

You are the custodians of nine precious Camphill communities, once aptly described as "a pearl beyond price." Camphill pioneered the then revolutionary idea that people of differing abilities should live as equals, sharing their lives and contributing to their community, according to their abilities. These strikingly simple, life-affirming concepts, carried from generation to generation by co-workers, have transformed the lives of thousands of people for the better.

The nub of our position is this: CVT faced serious challenges which it skilfully and successfully negotiated. It brought discipline and rigour where it was needed. But its recent measures announced on 13th May are entirely disproportionate to the task. They are - forgive the cliché - throwing the baby out with the bath water. The question is: why?

Our community may not face closure. But the spirit which has guided it - ever since Karl König began his pioneering work in a windy Scottish manse in 1939 - its very soul, is in peril.

You may think this is alarmist. You may think we are luddites, our faces set against the wind of change blowing through the care world. Or that we are blind to economic realities and the demands of an increasingly rigorous regulatory environment.

We wish to reassure you that this is not the case. All great organisations with deep roots and rich cultures have to refresh themselves from time to time. We understand that. We are realistic, flexible, open-minded and equal to the task.

Who we are

We are a group of articulate, reasonable people who live in the real world: accountants, lawyers, head teachers, journalists, university lecturers, engineers, artists, chief executives, some retired, some active. We don't live with our heads in the clouds. Neither are we disinterested bystanders.

But we have a profound and frustrating sense of not being heeded. This is compounded by a nagging sense that we are not getting the whole story. We are told CVT is compelled to do what it is doing for legal reasons. But it refuses to share them.

Here is just one example: why does CVT consider it riskier to have its beneficiaries sharing their lives with a family or a couple than to have them supervised by a succession of unfamiliar "sleepover" agency workers?

We are left trying to solve a puzzle with missing pieces.

Why Camphill?

At the heart of this dispute is the simple question: what is a Camphill community? We contend that it is of the very essence that Camphill communities are "intentional," with a clear identity and distinct values: a shared life; a sense of vocation; a community held together by relationships that spring from a calling, not from personal gain. The charity's stated objects could not be clearer on these points.

Authentic Camphill communities are not, as CVT suggests, past their sell-by date. König was way ahead of his time. Ideas like personalisation and the shared lives model – the idea that people should live together as equals - can be traced right back to his visionary work. This does not mean they can't be refreshed. But we should champion and build on Camphill, not emasculate it. In a world obsessed with standardisation and outcomes, Camphill communities offer a genuine choice, a refreshing alternative based on altruism, collaboration and mutual respect. Why else are people queuing up to get into them? And why do they stay for a lifetime?

In its recent "fact sheet," CVT says: "There is no right or wrong way of being Camphill." What alarms us about statements like this is that they hint, not at diversity, but a clean slate to be filled by whatever is deemed "best practice." Believe in everything and you end up believing in nothing. The question we *should* be asking is: how can we make Camphill fit for purpose while keeping it firmly tethered to its roots?

We urge you to watch this remarkable tribute in the Scottish parliament to the authentic Camphill movement on You Tube, rooted in vocation and life-sharing. Not only is it a coherent argument by MSPs against the "one-size-fits-all" approach but eloquently rebuts the notion that Camphills are an out-of-date model which needs root and branch reform.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prxB1E5LUAg>

Community

We want our community to be safe, compliant and accountable. Of course we do. But the new culture we see goes beyond the rigorous. An inclusive, collaborative approach is being replaced by something which seems to us unnecessarily rigid, even impersonal, putting distance between management and community. We recognise the administrative challenge of managing nine communities. But the need for top-down control of the ethos is less obvious.

Robust safeguarding is vital. We take this very seriously. But its application must be proportionate. Rigour should be tempered with judgment. The same goes for compliance. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Our community seems gripped by a kind of puritanism, which makes us feel deeply uneasy and adds to the sense of instability affecting our relatives.

What will ultimately make our relatives safer and happier is a self-confident community at ease with itself and its values. Not a community driven by fear of risk. Delrow is divided. Trust is a shadow of its former self. We need to unite around a shared vision and a sense of mutual respect, regardless of hierarchy. Otherwise we fear a "them and us" culture will corrode our sense of togetherness and inevitably turn Delrow into just another provider of social care.

The warmth of friends and family sharing a meal around a candle-lit table and the connection which flows from this simple ritual cannot realistically be maintained by shift workers, however kind and well-meaning they may be.

Our relatives shared their lives with people who got to know them intimately: their every mood, their whims, those hard-to-decode signals which provide fleeting glimpses into their inner world. Now they are recipients of care from "team leaders" and support workers who, with the best will in the world, cannot possibly bring the same depth of insight to the task. Handing over a file at the end of your shift may tick a box which says "Care Plan delivered," but it's no substitute for the real thing.

Even the language is different. Our loved ones are no longer friends or family but "service users." This may sound trivial to you, but the way in which our loved ones are being objectified offends them, and us. König stipulated that care is not a commodity that can be purchased but a gift freely given.

We acknowledge that some efforts are being made to fill the void. The General Manager is talking to relatives to see how they might be involved in shaping a new community out of the remnants of the old. Someone will be tasked with keeping the traditions of festivals, which play such an important role in the rhythm of life at Delrow alive. We welcome this. And we shall play our part. But let us be honest: this is, at best, tokenism, at worst closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

What makes us truly equal

The care world is full of buzzwords. One of them is "choice." The idea is admirable. Its application however is not a simple matter. To make an informed choice you have to understand its meaning and its consequences. And if you don't – and this applies to any of us, but particularly those with special needs - you need guidance. We see worrying signs of an over-zealous application of the principle for reasons which appear to us to be ideological, without due regard to capacity. After a meeting to tell beneficiaries about the momentous changes announced on 13th May, including an end to vocational working – a meeting of which we relatives were not informed - a young man asked his father, "Dad, what's an employee?"

One of the founding principles of Camphill is the idea that residents learn by doing. In other words, through work. In this way they contribute to the community as equals.

Our workshops are central to this idea and to the Camphill ethos. Watching daytime TV or shopping is now offered as an alternative activity of equal merit. What's wrong with that you may ask? People have a right to choose how they spend their days. Yes, they do. Provided they understand that work is what the rest of us do during the week and TV or shopping are leisure activities. If we are to treat the beneficiaries as our true equals then we should respect them enough to help them understand that they have responsibilities as well as rights and that their actions, like ours, have consequences.

TV and shopping may be fun. But workshops allow them to gain dignity, self-esteem and satisfaction. Work is a necessary part of our lives so why not theirs? The mutual reward of being given a pair of felt slippers or a basket by a son or a sister beaming with pride at Christmas is literally priceless.

So we worry that, in the headlong rush of change, not enough thought has been given to the likely impact on our relatives. Some, we wish to inform you, are showing real signs of anxiety and in one two cases borderline depression, which we believe comes from the abrupt turn their lives have taken. Their world is changing too fast. And they don't understand why. Some wish to leave. Relatives are looking elsewhere. We see, in short, our community which took decades to build, disintegrating. It is extremely painful to watch.

Co-workers

The reluctant and abrupt departure of so many of our co-workers at Delrow is a matter of great regret. These are the people who have built our community, together with the charity's beneficiaries with whom they have chosen to share their lives. To imagine that Delrow can evolve as a modern yet authentic Camphill community without their collective and individual wisdom is illusory. They carry the Camphill DNA. The ethos is not an abstract concept. It has to be handed on by people. Without that it will wither on the vine.

Of course we understand that we live in a changing world. Some people want to lead their lives in different ways. But despite assertions to the contrary, most of our co-workers at Delrow would have stayed and worked to bring about the necessary change, if they had not felt so marginalised. We are very close to them. We have observed at close quarters, day in day out for months now, with a sense of distress, even anguish, as they have struggled to reconcile their vocation with this sense of alienation.

Please understand, we don't take the view, "co-workers right or wrong." Nor are we fixated on one particular employment model. Some have undoubtedly struggled with the need for change. And they are not infallible. But neither are they dysfunctional. The analogy we would use is this: *if a family is struggling to cope, you don't remove the parents and replace them with social workers. You find ways of supporting the parents and keeping the family together.*

Devoted, generous, capable and by and large hugely competent, they have given their all, in some cases for decades, living, again by and large, modestly with little concern for personal reward.

Their exodus is a great personal loss to the residents, who feel bewildered and anxious, and a waste of precious human resources. It also sends an unmistakable signal to potential co-workers: Delrow is not the place for me.

Will who replace them? How will these new workers be inducted into the Camphill ethos? Will they have the same sense of vocation and mindset? Will they have the staying power to provide the continuity and stability crucial to the well-being of our loved ones?

The young volunteers

Our young volunteers, most from overseas, who bring so much sunny idealism, intellectual curiosity and youthful enthusiasm to the community and selfless support to our relatives, are deeply disillusioned. Some are leaving early. We understand that there is now a question mark over some of next year's intake from Europe, which is a terrible shame. These bright youngsters, who go on to be high-flyers in the caring professions, bring a sense of something larger to Delrow. We can't afford to lose them.

The money

We have serious concerns about the charity's financial future. We fear the additional expenditure on management, numerous consultancies of dubious worth and external training organisations, administration and staffing will prove unsustainable. Would it not be better to draw on all that the worldwide Camphill movement has to offer?

At Delrow, a single house hitherto run by a single co-worker couple, four young volunteers and occasional support workers will now require some dozen rotating shift workers, support workers and oversight by a care and support manager.

Legacies and the charity's reputation

Even allowing for the principle of diversity, there is now a clear and growing rift in the Camphill movement. It is not inconceivable that AoCC and CVT will go their separate ways unless a settlement can be reached. Should that happen we fear that legacies, which are vital to our continued viability, will dry up because the Camphill "brand" will have been fatally compromised. No amount of spin will disguise this.

How this makes us feel

Imagine that you have moved heaven and earth to secure a place for a loved one in a Camphill community. You have lobbied and cajoled local authorities, often fought through tribunals or the courts to achieve this, sometimes for years. It's been an expensive, emotionally draining, all-consuming process.

For your loved one, Camphill has been a way of life, familiar, stable, profoundly healing, perhaps for decades. Delrow is full of such lives transformed by that Camphill magic which, as a Trustee, you will have experienced the first time you set foot in one of its communities.

So imagine watching your community being transformed into a place with an entirely different spirit, an ethos which is frankly alien. You have been informed but not consulted. And, try as you might, you can't understand why this is happening. How would you feel?

The way forward

To sum up: We are reasonable people. We do recognise that the situation is complex. But we have serious concerns both about what is being proposed and how it is being handled.

A settlement will require imaginative solutions. Above all it will require cooperation and compromise. We understand that the charity's first duty is to its beneficiaries. But, as relatives and carers, we are their natural advocates and have a rightful place at the table.

This is not a moment to be carrying on regardless and hoping for the best. Too much is at stake.

In common with AoCC and the international Core Group we have asked that the measures announced on 13th May be suspended while roundtable talks take place to find a way forward.

We ask, at this defining moment in the charity's proud history, that you, as the charity's governing body, facilitate such an outcome.

Lucie Anderson and Mike Wood
Lynda and Ron Banks
Tamsin Booth
Maggie Brown
Tessa Burton Roberts

Victoria and Alain Catzeflis
Val Cole
Christine and Stephen Fletcher
Phyllis and Julian Haxby
Noni and Roger Horne
Virginia Ibbott
John March
Sally and Tony Murray-Jones
Deborah Nicholls
Flora Pedler
Elaine and Richard Phillips
Sarah and David Slade
Jeremy Young