

Village life under threat in North Yorks

A unique model village where adults with learning disabilities and co-workers share their homes and work alongside one another is set to undergo radical change.

Many staff and users contend the changes, which will introduce more formal employment conditions, are unnecessary and really about the adoption of a more hierarchical management system. They argue this will result in many co-workers leaving and a poorer service for disabled people.

Camphill Village Trust (CVT) management at Botton Village in the North York Moors National Park claim they are following legal instructions from the Inland Revenue and their auditors.

Based on the spiritual and educational concepts of Rudolf Steiner, the Camphill Movement, which today has over 100 communities worldwide – including 61 in the UK – dates back to the struggle against fascism in the 1930s.

When Germany annexed Austria in 1938, Dr Karl Konig, along with a group of young helpers and children with learning difficulties, escaped to Britain. They established Camphill House in Aberdeen and by 1950 it had 222 pupils during a period when educational provision for children with learning disabilities was virtually non-existent in Britain. Further Camphill schools were established and in 1955 the first adult provision was established at Botton.

CVT principles state: “We aim to establish villages for working communities for mentally handicapped persons.... where members share the same family life and sense of security and confidence as is felt and enjoyed by members of the normal happy family.”

Residents unhappy

At the 600-acre Botton site there are four working farms, a sophisticated seed factory, bakery, café, school, woodwork shop, church, village shop and concert hall. There is also space in which to explore the countryside in safety and a range of social, cultural, religious and educational activities. Botton is financed by sales of its products, legacy donations and from being a registered social care provider.

Botton is home to around 280 people, half with learning disabilities who are given full-time extended care and support by unsalaried co-workers, who in return receive free accommodation in 29 large homes, food, travel costs, occasional holidays and expenses.

CVT, which manages nine Camphill villages, has told its co-workers that they must become paid members of staff with terms and contracts. Jobs are being advertised for support workers at £7.25 an hour, senior support workers at £7.75-£8.25 and team leaders.

With the nearest train station three miles away applicants are told that their own transport is advisable.

Many residents and co-



Botton residents and co-workers Scarlett Durant, Jakob Kielwein, Mary Mascaro, Sarah Lucassen and James Skinner. Photo: Mark Metcalf

workers are unhappy at the proposed changes. Resident Mary Mascaro, who has lived at Botton since 1982 and works in the bakery, said: “It is a good place to live and without the shared living I would be lonely. I am already concerned that one of my friends is moving because she does not like what is happening.”

‘I feel safe’

James Skinner, who has autism and Addison’s disease and whose parents live in Kent, said: “I prefer living as independently as I can in a sustainable village in the countryside where I feel safe. I make wooden toys and work in the seed workshop.

“The co-workers have helped me a great deal with all aspects of my life, including my speech. They are very enthusiastic and highly motivated and that should not be lost. I am unlikely

to stay if the changes are pushed through.”

The co-workers come to Botton from across the world and are highly educated. According to a trust spokesperson many are happy with the changes – under which they will no longer live with residents and will be moved into separate rented accommodation.

Horticulturalist Jakob Kielwein, 25, came from Germany two years ago. He works alongside Skinner in the seed workshop. “It is the biggest bio-dynamic seed centre in Britain and the man in charge is a great teacher and I am learning a lot,” said Kielwein. “Productivity is not important but the quality is first class.

“My work with nature is combined with shared living with vulnerable people when I have to be truly me. I now have