

Dear Mr Knowles,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with the young Co-Workers on Thursday the 18th of September. We appreciate that you tried to answer our questions, as you said yourself it is important to be open and able to discuss the situation in Botton and find out how we can move forward in a positive way. We are sorry that you are finding your work with CVT at Botton so very stressful and that you didn't find it easy to talk to us. Botton was, and still is, an amazing place to live and work and until recently employees also were happy to work here.

After meeting we felt some questions remain unanswered and there are some points which require elucidation. These are outlined below:

The current changes and the future of Botton Village

You assured us that despite there being lots of talk of changes and what is set to change, in reality you `don't think anything has changed`. You also stated that in the future you `don't see why it should change` and that people will still be able to life share and take part in festivals in the same way. You told us as well that many people tell you things have changed and will change but they are unable to provide examples of this to you.

We would love to be reassured by this, but what we believe, already see, and what other CVT employees talk about as certain, is that there are set to be numerous changes which simply cannot occur without having a serious impact on the community and the lives of all who reside therein. We know of changes; people who have been asked to leave and also that some long term co-workers have now been appointed new roles in the employment model which you wish to impose. These appear to be very serious changes already and contrary to the information given in our meeting; that we are still a `no way near that situation` where people would be asked to leave.

As it stands, there doesn't appear to be a clear picture of what will happen and how your `new Botton` will look with a great deal remaining unknown such as rent and the living costs of the Co-Workers who would receive a salary. You said yourself that it is `hugely dangerous` which has made us uncomfortable as we believe there should be more certainty when inviting people down such a path. Again we wonder if there isn't another way.

You quoted the 1954 Foundation Document in saying that the community of Botton Village was formed to provide education and training for people to `become citizens of the world and move on`. Could you let us know which document this is you are referring to as we are interested to read this ourselves as our understanding was that Botton was founded to provide a home to the people who trained in other centres and Camphill Schools, where they could lead their adult lives? Could you clarify what you meant as your statement suggests that Botton is there to provide a temporary place for these individuals to be, but

what we have seen is that many people find a home here where they live fulfilling and happy lives.

The ultimatum

Many of us have heard about the `ultimatum` that was presented to the Long Term Co-Workers but you were able to assure us that there is `no ultimatum` which we found confusing as it is contrary to what we have heard thus far. Are you able to clarify this, and if it does indeed exist, why you felt the need to deny it. You told us that there have been `plenty of offers` for open dialogue with the Co-Workers regarding this and the changes, but to our knowledge this offer was in the form of discussing with individuals their next steps, on the assumption that the move to employment was non-negotiable, rather than engaging with the co-worker body as a whole.

Life-Sharing

You mentioned that change occurs all the time, that we just have to look at how long certain Co-Workers have been here and who is life-sharing, but all the people you named are sharing their lives with the Villagers in the traditional way and are people who would like to keep it that way.

Therefore, we don't think your observation has much validity, particular when it is clear that Co-Workers who haven't been here long, the 'new generation', are very keen to carry on with the life-sharing model.

We were really pleased to hear you suggest that nothing will change with regards children being able to be around when their parents are working, in the same way as now. Could you confirm this for us as it is contrary to what was previously understood? We feel that it would be a great shame if children were not allowed to be present in this way as we enjoy having them around, as do the Villagers. As Young Co-Workers we enjoy being part of the extended family of the Co-Workers who live in the houses and believe that it contributes to the positive, memorable experience many of us have here.

We were pleased to hear that you said that there wouldn't need to be separate entrances and that essentially the houses could stay how they are if people would prefer that. However, the implication was that this may only be possible through contravention of the law or turning a blind eye in the same way that you said you do in `rarely driving below 70 mph` and `regularly` talking on your mobile phone while driving, which raised serious concerns for us as we feel this attitude to the rules and laws by which the organisation must comply, would surely put the Co-Workers at risk.

Comparisons to Larchfield

We are pleased at the success of Larchfield but acknowledge that you admit it is not a good example, as it wasn't working as a community before. However, you said that the situation at Larchfield had many similarities to the current situation at Botton and that Larchfield was not a happy place at that time. We believe Botton to be a happy place and enjoy life here as we believe the Villagers do also. This is despite the apparent worry and stress which people feel at the moment as a result of the prospect of losing their homes due to the changes being implemented by CVT. This we feel to be more than understandable, and would appreciate it if you and the CVT were to consider that Botton has never been solely about the Villagers (or beneficiaries as you prefer) and acknowledge that the home and livelihood of many is at stake.

One of the points you made was about how someone at Larchfield had spent 15 years sweeping and that people aren't always given the opportunity to change. We believe people should always be given the opportunity to develop but do not see this as being dependent on employment or shared-living, but simply as compliance with social care regulations and good practice. Our understanding is that people at Botton are provided with opportunity and choice, and if ever there are exceptions to this then we believe and hope this can be easily rectified. We would expect this in a Co-Working model and do not believe it should be used as an example in favour of employment.

You told us of a remark made by a Board Member of the Anthroposophical Society of Britain who you said described what he saw at Larchfield as a 'bright, colourful, vibrant community' and what he saw at Botton was a 'cold decaying shell'. We would like to know who this was as we are concerned that they got the wrong impression of Botton Village and we would be very keen to invite him back.

Employment

We were informed that employment would be offered to all current Co-Workers should they want it. Could you clarify this as this wasn't the impression that we got and it appears that there are only certain job roles which remain to be filled? Furthermore, we have heard rumour that there are plans to close a significant number of houses in the near future, if this were to happen, would it still be possible to offer all the current Long Term Co-Workers employment? We have also noticed that many of the roles recently assigned to the Gerald's appear to differ from their former role and it is unclear what their role will now be in the house and community. If someone is to become the Café Supervisor, is this a full time job for which they have to give up their current role in the house? We are also unsure of the reason for some of the new job roles as in many cases their already appears to be Co-Workers who take on these roles. If the charity and community is in such a dire financial situation it wouldn't appear to make sense to pay salaries for roles currently being done by volunteers, but perhaps you can clarify this for us?

There appears to be a lot of confusion from the point of view of the CVT as to the employment status of the Co-Workers. To the best of our knowledge they are not, nor have they ever been, employees. It is acknowledged by HMRC that they are self-employed, but purely for the return of the self-assessment tax form and we are aware that there is a special section on the HMRC website for Camphill Co-Workers. It is not clear to us the logic you and CVT use when you say that because Co-Workers have their needs met, with the use of a car and paid holidays etc., that they are employees. They do not have a contract neither do they receive salary. Are you able to explain to us how having one's needs met makes a person like an employee? We feel this is important as it seems that it is only through the CVT regarding the non-employed Co-Workers as employees, and treating them so, that there would be any breach of the tax law, according to the Trevett opinion. We are also uncertain why you say the opinion is no longer valid, as the way in which Co-Workers live has not changed since the opinion was given, and the Opinion obtained by the Association of Camphill Communities supports Trevett.

Finances

It was unclear to us how having employees instead of Co-Workers would save so much money as your response was simply `just think about it`. We would appreciate if you would be able to expand upon this for us?

You talked a lot about the overspending of the Co-Workers. To our knowledge, no one is denying that there have been people who have spent too much money but it is difficult to see why this can't simply be more effectively regulated. For example, would it not be possible to give Co-Workers a budget for a number of years so that if a considerable amount of it was spent one year there would be fewer funds available the following year or number of years. This could also allow people to live more frugally in some years in anticipation of a more costly holiday.

It is clear that savings need to be made to address the funding cuts as well as loss on which the charity runs that you talked about. We are keen to know whether the urgency and necessity of these financial troubles have ever been properly expressed to the Co-Workers to enable the formation of a plan to tackle this. We are not aware of anyone who would be against it working together to deal with these issues. Moreover, none of the Co-Workers are saying that they will stay only if they are allowed to spend large sums of money.

When we discussed the savings you had made by reducing the number of agency staff some aspects remained unclear. As we understand it, this was a move that had already been begun and that was actually necessary due to the number of agency staff exceeding the number of available roles.

Engagement of the villagers

This is an area that we are especially concerned about as we feel the villagers have not been properly involved in the decisions on whether they want these changes to occur, despite the claims that they are at the heart of everything you and CVT do. We thought the information letter with pictures to be patronising as well as misleading and untrue: the general message was that nothing will change and there is no need to worry. Our understanding is that the vast majority do not want the changes and are made uncomfortable by them. This was clear to see most recently at the latest Botton Commons where a number of Villagers stood up to say that there are changes happening which they do not feel comfortable with and that they don't want Co-Workers to leave. It was touching to witness them speak out about this but also very sad to see how their feelings are not being listened to.

You said that there will be a proper consultation process for when the changes would actually affect them. We believe that the changes are already affecting them and that when you are referring to would be too late. We are aware that long term co-workers have been asked to leave and are unaware of whether the villagers who will be affected by this have been informed and consulted. We are concerned that through this the charity may be in breach of the Equality Act. It is also disappointing to see from an organisation that repeatedly claims that these people are 'at the heart of everything' they do and raises question of the sincerity of this overused statement.

Direct involvement

We appreciate that the chair of the charity has been to visit Botton to hear the concerns of the people living here as we believe there should be a lot more direct involvement between the people within the CVT and the people 'on the ground' who live in Botton Village. However, it was surprising to hear that in the last 3 months the chair has only come to Botton twice as we feel that for a matter of such great important, this is too little. We would be keen to see more engagement as to our knowledge, there has been very little direct involvement throughout these changes, which appear to be planned and orchestrated by individuals who have never met most of the people who will be most affected, the people who live together in Botton, the Villagers and the Co-Workers.

With concern,

Young Co-Workers of Botton Village