

Cohousing – a model for Camphill?

A paper written by Andrew Plant for the Scottish Neighbourhood Meeting September 2013

Camphill Scotland is setting up a steering group that will be looking at the most effective way of promoting resilience within and among the Scottish communities and exploring models of succession and leadership in times of change. One idea is to bring about a regional day event in conjunction with the Neighbourhood Meeting to explore these themes together.

This paper is a contribution to what I imagine will be an ongoing regional discussion on these themes. It sets out to put forward a new model of community living and life-sharing that might go some way to address issues about succession and about finding new ways forward for the Camphill communities in Scotland.

The background to this paper is the recognition that there are certain trends at work in the Scottish region that seem to call for new and innovative responses.

- There is heightened sense of individualisation and diversity in the communities and also heightened levels of engagement with society and the state.
- The emphasis in terms of care and support for people with learning disabilities is now firmly on personalisation and control over decisions relating to where people live, the kind of support that they wish for and their lifestyle. This is reflected in new funding models – Supported Living, Self-Directed Support, individual budgets and Direct Payments.
- Some co-workers feel the need for a greater sense of choice and personal autonomy – for more space, time and security and perhaps for greater separation between their work and their personal life.
- Some co-workers are choosing to live outwith the communities in which they work.
- More people outwith the communities are being employed to work in the communities in a variety of roles.
- Elder co-workers are exploring ways in which they would like to live once they retire and as they need more support

Community Development

My ongoing study into the development of intentional communities leads me to recognise that the current manifestation of community takes the form of eco-communities and cohousing, both of which model a looser, more flexible form of community than in the past – a model that sets out to achieve a new balance between personal autonomy and a collective lifestyle – between the need for privacy and the wish for a supportive and co-operative social setting. Cohousing has the potential to offer a new and more flexible model of community that might provide new responses to the changing situations in Camphill communities.

What is Cohousing?

Cohousing has been described as 'Living Apart Together'. It was pioneered in Denmark in the 1960s and is now well established in Scandinavia, Holland, the USA, Canada and New Zealand. It was originally developed in response to the social isolation of suburbia and to promote a greater sense of neighbourliness and community. It began with neighbours taking down the fences that divided their properties, sharing gardens, tools, cars, meals and childcare. It then developed into a fully designed, planned and self-managed co-operative housing system with an emphasis on sharing and ecological awareness and responsibility. Within the cohousing model members live in independent units – houses, flats or apartments – and there are a range of communal areas – common dining rooms, meeting rooms, laundries, workspaces and leisure spaces. The layout of the buildings and common spaces is designed to promote a high level of social interaction. Cars are often relegated to the periphery of the site which allows for the creation of pedestrian walkways and safe play areas for children.

In some cases members pay rent for their accommodation; in others members either buy or build their own house. In addition there is often a financial contribution for shared facilities, services and resources and members are expected to provide so many hours in one form or another to the collective enterprise. They are also expected to take part in communal activities such as meals, meetings, work projects and social occasions, but this will depend on their time, willingness and choice. Cohousing is perhaps more organised and planned than other forms of intentional community in terms of legal structures and tenancy agreements. At the same time it is also looser and less demanding than other forms of intentional communities and allows members to have more choice in just how much community they might want and when. There is not a shared economy and there is no expectation of a shared belief system.

The most common pattern is for a group of like-minded people to plan their cohousing project together over many years as they seek to raise capital funds, design their buildings and their layout and put together the tenancy arrangements, membership selection criteria, management and governance procedures and collective agreements and policies before building the buildings and infrastructure and eventually moving in. The intention is to build community during the planning phase. In other situations a group might buy existing property and 'retrofit' it to serve their needs. Either way, the emphasis in cohousing is on self-governance, involvement and mutual support while retaining a sense of personal privacy, independence and autonomy.

Most cohousing projects are a Company Limited by Guarantee, an Industrial and Provident Society or a Community Interest Group. They may operate in partnership with a not-for-profit Housing Association, sometimes with a level of state funding for affordable housing and social housing. There might also be legal regulations to do with becoming a Registered Social Landlord and a House of Multiple Occupancy (HMO).

Cohousing in Scotland

Cohousing is still a relatively new phenomenon in the UK and has yet to take off in a big way. According to the UK Cohousing Network there are 14 cohousing communities in UK in 2013. However, there are many more - perhaps up to 40 - in the developmental stages so things are set to change.

I can find no evidence of any existing cohousing projects in Scotland but the two most recent building developments at Findhorn have both been cohousing projects. This comes from the recognition that today people are looking for different forms of community.

There are two multi-generational cohousing ventures that are in the planning stage – one is Galloway Cohousing in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbrightshire in Dumfries and Galloway and the other is Clachan an Gearr Community Cooperative in Forres.

There are three groups working to establish senior cohousing ventures in Scotland and six south of the border. The three in Scotland are Vivarium in Fife (in association with Kingdom Housing Association); Culdees Eco-Village in Perthshire and the Quakers who are hoping to start up a senior cohousing project in the Glasgow/Stirling area.

The major difficulties in setting up a new cohousing venture - apart from holding the planning group together for a considerable period of time and negotiating the inevitable differences of viewpoints and aspirations - appear to be raising the necessary capital funds and securing a building site with planning permission in competition with commercial developers.

Cohousing and Camphill

Whereas for most people who join a cohousing community, cohousing provides them with a greater sense of community for Camphill co-workers it might be seen as a step back from 'full' community and from the traditional Camphill life-sharing model. In this sense it might represent a retreat from community. Having said that, it is no longer the case today that all people in Camphill subscribe to the traditional unsalaried residential life-sharing model. It could even be said that in some communities co-workers are already living a communal lifestyle not too dissimilar from the cohousing model.

Times have changed and over recent years various forms of living and working in Camphill have evolved and it is perhaps only because of this ability to respond to changing circumstances and the personal needs of residential co-workers, employed co-workers and people with disabilities that Camphill has been able to continue.

Cohousing offers a new option. The choice need no longer be between full life-sharing or living out. The cohousing model adds to the diversity of choice and therefore might serve to enhance the attraction of Camphill communities in terms of succession - in terms of people staying on in their communities and in terms of new people who wish to join. In addition it also allows for a greater variety of provision of care and support, of accommodation and lifestyle for those whose places in Camphill communities are funded.

There are various groups of people for whom the cohousing model might be attractive:

- The group of 'active elderly' co-workers in the Aberdeen area are exploring various options for a group-living situation. One of these options is senior cohousing. The advantage of cohousing is that it promotes self-management, involvement, common interest, social activity and mutual support and also provides the choice of buying in additional care and support from others outwith the community as needed.
- For younger and newer co-workers cohousing offers an alternative to either full life-sharing or having to live outwith the community. Co-workers would have their own private rented accommodation either in a separate house or a separate flat/apartment within a shared house. With the cohousing model co-workers would work a shift rota which would include sleep-overs in houses in which people with disabilities live. Alternatively co-workers might choose to be responsible for one of the workshops. Co-workers would join in with the communal social and cultural activities, management meetings and other common activities and responsibilities yet would have more control over their personal space and time. It could also provide the possibility of one person working in the community and their partner working elsewhere. The advantage is that co-workers wishing a more autonomous lifestyle can still live within the community rather than having to live out. In addition the security of tenure that goes with renting accommodation might be more attractive to some co-workers than the present arrangement in which residential co-workers have no security. Under a cohousing model co-workers could presumably choose to be salaried and have their own tenancy or some of them could get together under a shared salary scheme and a group tenancy.
- People who are currently employed to come in and work in the communities - either in the houses or in the workshops - could choose to move on site and rent accommodation. They could move in with their families and one partner could work outwith the community. Under the cohousing model they would be nearer to their work, could more easily be available for sleep over duties in other houses and could choose to take part in social and cultural activities and any other activities in the community outwith their working hours. As tenants of the cohousing project they would have the same obligations as to a minimum level of communal involvement as other co-worker tenants.
- Each adult with disabilities would have their own tenancy just as they have currently under Supported Living. It might be that the cohousing model could offer more variety in the options of support, living arrangements and lifestyle choices for these tenants. Presumably tenants with learning disabilities would have more say in community agreements, membership selection and other governance issues.

There are many unanswered questions in all of this.....

- Presumably there would need to be new legal structures in place if a community were to change over to cohousing but it is not all clear what these would be and to what extent existing legal arrangements would allow for this. Would there need to be partnership with a Housing Association?
- Those communities that have already separated out the property-owning company from the operating company – which includes all of those communities in Scotland – are better placed to move forward with a cohousing model.
- There would need to be tenancy agreements and new agreements as to work, contributing time to the community, community involvement and community management. This might need to be a different body than the property-owning company as it is doubtful if the existing property-owning companies would wish to be responsible for this task.
- Can the communities as they are today provide for all that is needed for cohousing or would some communities need to build new buildings? Some communities already have spaces for common activities and meals, others do not. Could communities afford to build such new buildings? Either way new funds would be needed to either change the use of existing buildings e.g., conversion into flats and apartments and/or to put up new buildings.
- Could one community have different models running side by side? Could some co-workers in some houses follow the traditional residential unsalaried life-sharing model and other co-workers and other houses follow the cohousing model?
- Would it fit better if the workshops changed to become social enterprises?

Conclusion

I see that cohousing has the potential to offer new answers to some of the questions facing the Camphill communities today. I do not consider that it is the only answer and that it will be the answer for all co-workers and all communities. What is clear is that we need to look at new ideas, and new models if we wish to ensure the future viability of the Camphill communities – both in terms of keeping younger co-workers committed to living and working in the communities and to carrying them forward and also in terms of making the communities more attractive to new people to join them.

It seems to me that we should be encouraging experimentation, innovation and the development of new social and organisational prototypes in order to see which of them hold most potential for the future development of the Camphill communities, in the knowledge that today a choice of different living and working arrangements all in one community might be more attractive to the next generation of Camphill co-workers than the stark choice to either live in or to live out.

A lot more work needs to be done if the cohousing model is to be considered as something for the future of Camphill communities in Scotland. This paper only sets out some preliminary thoughts.

Neil Henery and I have taken part in a weekend Cohousing Course run by Amanda Pearson at the Threshold Centre in Dorset in November. We have made reports to both the Scottish Neighbourhood Meeting and to the Camphill Scotland Council. We will be exploring the cohousing model and its potential for Camphill communities in Scotland as an integral part of the on-going work on succession planning. I will be leading a series of seminars on these themes at the upcoming New Lanark inclusive conference in May 2014 under the provisional title of 'Changes in Community Forms – from co-working to cohousing'

Proposals

- Some individuals to be tasked with finding out more about cohousing in relation to Camphill through talking to other people who have experience in cohousing – people in Findhorn and those in groups who are working to set up cohousing projects in Scotland.
- To contact other Camphill regions and communities to see if cohousing or similar models are in place elsewhere.
- To discuss the findings in the Camphill Scotland Council, the Scottish Neighbourhood Meeting, the Camphill property owning companies in Scotland and other appropriate forums
- To set up a feasibility study to explore cohousing in the context of Camphill in Scotland.

Some resources on cohousing:-

UK Cohousing Network www.cohousing.or.uk

Co-housing in Britain. A Diggers and Dreamers review. By Bunker, Coates, Field and How.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation: A Better Life. Senior Cohousing communities – an alternative approach for the UK? Maria Brenton. January 2013.

The Senior Cohousing Handbook 2nd Edition. A Community Approach to Independent Living. Charles Durrett.

Sustainable Community. Learning from the cohousing model. Graham Meltzer. Trafford.