

## **Bridging the islands: research and Camphill's social mission**

Adapted from a presentation given at the Camphill Families and Friends Scottish Branch Launch in Edinburgh on Saturday 4 May 2013

*"We cannot only build islands when so much suffering and misery abounds in the big cities..."*

(Karl König, School Community Meeting, February 1952)

### **Research as communication**

In their twofold quest to build new socio-cultural forms and serve society through caring for those with special needs, the Camphill communities are today faced with a threefold challenge: to *describe* their approach to the rest of the world; to *explain* their approach to the rest of the world; and to *justify* their approach to the rest of the world.

Today the emphasis in social care is on accountability and studies tend to focus on evidence of quality performance as defined by external regulators or standardised indexes. Accountability in any meaningful sense, however, cannot be demonstrated if it is not grounded in knowledge of *what* a group of people is doing and the members' *own* account of *why* they are doing it. In other words, description and explanation are pre-requisites to justification, since they allow an organisation or community to be judged on its own terms and against its own statements of purpose.

Presenting as full a picture as possible is only more important where it may be precisely those aspects of Camphill life, philosophy and tradition neither required nor assessed by regulators which make the communities distinctive as 'services' and create the greatest value for their members.

Research is one means of presenting that full picture; it can serve the purpose of description, explanation or justification, or all three at once. It can be about counting and measuring or about telling stories, about documenting processes or giving a voice to individuals who often go unheard or unheeded. It can be done by outside experts who observe from a distance or it can be 'action research' carried out by people within organisations, reflecting on their own daily practice. All types of research are concerned with – or at least ought to be concerned with – meaningfully linking the doers with the thinkers and, crucially, with the decision makers.

### **Research on Camphill**

In fact, a significant amount of research on and in Camphill has been happening over the last decade. Opposition to the proposed Western Peripheral Route in Aberdeen generated a lot of publicity for Camphill and was the impetus behind an in-depth study exploring the quality of life of young people in Camphill School Aberdeen. The study (Brown, 2004) highlighted the positive impact of the carefully crafted environment and therapeutic lifestyle on children diagnosed with multiple complex disorders. Another study (Swinton *et al*, 2006), carried out in connection with the University of Aberdeen, explored the spiritual lives of those living and working in two

Camphill communities in England and one in Scotland. Again, the report shed a positive light on Camphill, particularly with regard to its recognition of the vital relationship between spiritual wellbeing and meaningful work.

As well as commissioned projects, a number of pieces of work analysing different aspects of Camphill's past and present exist in the form of BA, MA and PhD dissertations. Many of these studies are presented in *Discovering Camphill*, a book edited by Robin Jackson (2011) which gathers together articles and research findings from Camphill communities across the world, including the UK, the USA, South Africa and Vietnam.

These are just a few examples of formal and informal research efforts and both the number and variety of new developments is promising. Having said that, there is much greater potential for these different activities and initiatives to be co-ordinated, promoted and publicised in a way which directly and strategically helps the Camphill communities to meet the challenges ahead.

### **The Camphill Scotland Research Group**

This was the thinking behind Camphill Scotland's research initiative. The Research Group itself was formed in 2009 and its members are individuals from both within and out with the Scottish communities who are either doing or interested generally in research. The principle aim of the Research Group is to encourage and facilitate the use of *evidence* in representing the work that the Camphill communities do, and to use *evidence* to demonstrate the value they create for both their own members and society at large.

The Group envisages a number of ways to move towards this goal. One involves capitalising on work that has already been done. As has been said, while quite a lot has been happening in this realm, the potential benefits of this work have not necessarily been realised. Findings remain unpublished, reports are not well disseminated or communicated to different audiences; people simply don't know what is going on and what is available.

One task of the Research Group, therefore, is to collate all existing research on Camphill and create a database to make this work easily accessible to both outsiders who want to investigate Camphill and insiders who want to enhance their own knowledge and practice by drawing on evidence in their field. The best forum for such a database is currently being considered.

A second aim of the Research Group is to facilitate and commission new research. In 2012 the Group's Facilitator, Steve Baron, completed a quantitative study which compared Care Inspectorate 'quality gradings' given to the Scottish Camphill communities and other Scottish providers in the voluntary, private and public sectors. These statistics were illuminating; charities on the whole outperform public and private sector services and Camphill performed the highest in all four inspected areas (Care and Support, Environment, Staffing and Management and Leadership). These statistics effectively 'prove' that, within these criteria at least, Camphill does a good job.

This is an excellent starting point. It is, however only a starting point. Much more needs to be done to *explain* these results. What is it about Camphill in particular that leads to these high standards? What is different, special, *unique* about the Camphill approach and how can this uniqueness be captured, measured and articulated in terms that others can both understand and respect?

It is with this question in mind that the Research Group has proposed a study which will explore the essentials of Camphill, 'Camphillness' if you like. It will attempt to define common characteristics of Camphill communities and investigate the effect of these characteristics on the people who live there. This project is in its early stages. At the moment existing literature is being reviewed in order to identify key themes and questions which can then be tested for their relevance and applicability to the Scottish communities.

Another, connected, project with which the Research Group is involved on an advisory level has been commissioned by Newton Dee Community. The study examines practices and values within Newton Dee seen from the different perspectives of villagers, their families, co-workers and employees. Incidentally, the project has already revealed a fantastic willingness on the part of parents and siblings to participate in research. Many see it as a chance for their experience to be shared more widely, as well as providing a concrete means for them to promote the work of Camphill.

Finally, the Research Group is supporting a piece of action research conducted by Camphill Scotland Facilitator, Neil Henery. This is a study of three Camphill communities in Scotland aimed at appreciating more clearly what has enabled these communities to survive and thrive in times of challenge and change. The results should be of benefit to the communities themselves, to other Camphill communities and will assist Camphill Scotland in its task of representing communities' interests on the national stage.

### **Developing a research culture**

The Research Group is not only interested in facilitating projects led by professional or experienced researchers, but in encouraging communities and individuals in communities to get involved with research themselves.

In 2012 Apex Scotland published a report which looked at ways to improve the use of research in third sector organisations. Among its key findings is the observation that "People working in third sector organisations, particularly those in service delivery roles, often don't think research is something for them to engage with", either because it is seen as merely an extra burden on an already heavy workload or a task only for senior and policy focused staff. The report goes on to say that "there also appears to be something about the term 'research' which is a barrier for people" (Lightowler, 2012). Research may be perceived as something purely abstract or overly complicated, neither relevant to their everyday duties nor something they might have the capacity to do.

This is far from the case, perhaps especially in Camphill. There is a wealth of expertise and knowledge within the communities, based on decades of practical

experience and experiment grappling with many of the issues that today are at the forefront of the minds of care professionals and policy-makers alike. Much of the work that is going on in the communities could, with a shift in organisation and outlook, be made use of as valuable research data. In other words, it is more a matter of encouraging a slightly different way of thinking about existing activities than it is about creating new ones. It is about making it possible for those who do have an interest to take on small, manageable projects closely related to their existing tasks, whether for the purpose of personal development, for community learning, or to demonstrate a particular way of doing things.

An example of the latter type of project is currently ongoing in Camphill School. Two co-workers are conducting a small empirical study documenting the effects of oil dispersion baths on young people with ASD who are hypersensitive to the sense of touch. The oil dispersion bath is an anthroposophical therapy that they use regularly in their daily work and these individuals were inspired by their own personal experiences of success with this remedy. Their efforts to document outcomes and to bring some methodology to the process are just one small but significant way of serving the aim of transparency and communication, of enabling a greater understanding of the methods and value of the anthroposophical approach to care.

The Research Group thus hopes to be a resource of support and advice for individuals wishing to carry out any type of research. This could, for instance, take the form of assistance with design and methodological issues, with writing reports and disseminating findings, with funding applications or developing a community-wide research strategy.

### **Sharing our riches**

The call for the cultivation of a research culture within Camphill need not be presented only in terms of a necessary reaction to the times, that is to say, something the communities are obliged to do in response to external pressures and demands. On the contrary, research is very much in the spirit of Camphill's original social mission and is part of its history. In her study of the origins and development of Camphill, Costa describes how the founders intended not only to create facilities for people with diverse special needs, but to use the opportunities they had and the knowledge they gained to generally enhance public understanding of those special needs, and in this way to ensure that these individuals would be adequately provided for in the long term (Costa, 2008).

The communities find themselves today amidst a growing interest in Camphill and heightened public profile (evidenced, for instance, by the motion to support Camphill presented in the Scottish Parliament in 2012), an increasing openness to and dialogue with other organisations, bodies and communities and the enormous goodwill and resources of families and friends and other support networks. Perhaps all this represents an opportunity to return more purposefully to that task of contributing to public awareness and debate. Perhaps the time is ripe for Camphill communities to more consciously urge their members to look beyond their own borders and make efforts to share the wealth of knowledge and practical insight built

up over many years of pioneering. It is not only by doing things differently, but *telling the world about it*, that Camphill has the best chance of influencing the future.

*If anyone would like more information about any of the works mentioned in this article, or about the Research Group, please contact Maria at: [lyons\\_maria@hotmail.com](mailto:lyons_maria@hotmail.com)*