

COTSWOLD COMMUNITY

WORKING NOTE NO. 14

by

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Introduction

This note follows a visit paid to the Cotswold Community on October 7/8th, 1975.

The following were the main topics discussed:-

- 1) The need to establish and develop another senior management role in the Community
- 2) The Bursar's relationship with the Wiltshire County Council, particularly with respect to financial control and the provision of building and maintenance servicing
- 3) The roles of the Domestic Bursar and assistant Domestic Bursar
- 4) The development of Larkrise
- 5) The continuation of the Consultancy contract with the Tavistock Institute

1) An Additional Senior management Role

There seems little doubt in anyone's mind now that there is a need for another staff member at a senior level. The present senior staff are Richard Balbernie, with the following roles directly responsible to him as Principal:-

- The Bursar
- The Domestic Bursar
- The Head of the Polytechnic
- The Heads of Group Living Units

There are differences within this group in the extent to which they are involved in and responsible for general tasks in the Community. Notably, the Heads of Group Living Units are almost wholly concerned with managing their Units and the boys in them and are little involved in Wider Community responsibilities. By contrast, the Bursar, the Domestic Bursar and the Head of the Polytechnic, are all considerably involved in general Community affairs. This is partly a reflection of the content of their roles which all have Community-wide functions with services to all boys and in the case of the Bursar and the Domestic Bursar, to all staff. Partly stemming from that, it is those three people who mainly carry general Community functions, not necessarily within their roles,

notably the manning of the telephone when the switchboard is not in operation, and certain functions delegated by the Principal out of his own role, notably being the intake of boys delegated to the Head of the Polytechnic, or perhaps more personally to Mike Jinks. However, I think the position of these three roles in relation to Community-wide functions may also stem partly from an unresolved hangover from a previous organisation when there was a Head of Group Living who was a senior staff member, which meant that the Heads of individual Group Living Units were not senior staff, being on the third level of the hierarchy. The discontinuation of the role of Head of Group Living also meant that there is one less person available for Community-wide tasks. Be that as it may, the fact is that Community-wide functions are a heavy load on the three people concerned and it would seem important to find some way of spreading the load, or even taking it away from these roles altogether. This is particularly true of the delegation of the management of intake to the Head of the Polytechnic. The load here has recently been significantly increased by the growth in the total number of boys in the Community with at least a temporarily larger intake. Preoccupation with this task involves the risk that the Head of the Polytechnic be unduly distracted from his primary role of managing the provision of education within a therapeutic setting in the Polytechnic.

The expansion of the Community also inevitably implies an increase in the work load of the Principal, e.g. there are more staff to be selected, trained and managed, and in spite of the participation of other staff in this work, the load falls heavily on the Principal. The increase in the number of Group Living Units also increases the management and supervisory load of the Principal; the increased number of boys increases the size of the task of “encompassing” them and keeping effectively au fait with what is going on in the boy population. This implies that it may become increasingly necessary for the Principal to delegate appropriate sub-tasks to his senior staff if he is to be free to sustain his overall management of a larger Community effectively. In particular here, the question of the management of change and innovation is important. Some of the responsibility for this has in the past been vested in the management consultant, first A. K. Rice, and now myself. In discussing my new contract, Richard Balbernie and I did, in fact, discuss whether and when the management of innovation might be fully invested in the Principal. If this were to be done, or even to facilitate it being done, the Principal would again need to be freed from some of his present commitments.

This all seems add up to the fact that the Community is short of senior staff. It does not look as though the problems of work load and task assignment can be adequately resolved by considering the allocation of tasks between existing staff. Not only are they already fully or more than fully deployed but also none of their roles seem fully appropriate for the delegation of Community-wide tasks of a major kind such as intake. It seems to me that staff working with boys in Group Living Units or the Polytechnic need the freedom to be very committed on their own areas without major tasks outside them and they also need to be well-supported. The Bursar’s and the Domestic Bursar’s roles probably do not involve them closely enough in a relationship with boys to make it easy for them to take on such tasks.

Having reached the conclusion that a new senior staff role seems necessary, it still has not proved at all easy to locate the role within the system and to begin to define its content. We have discussed the possible revival of the role of Head of Group Living but this does not seem wholly appropriate although some sub-tasks, notably intake, could be placed appropriately in the role. It is not an overall Community role and, furthermore, it would once again automatically demote a Head of Group Living Units to third line management; also it involves the danger of removing the Principal from effective contact with Group Living Units and so with the state of the boy population. It would seem that what is required is some kind of deputy to the Principal, although that too has difficulties, notably previously experiences in institutions that it can easily become a dogsbody role with inadequately defined tasks and responsibilities, unsatisfactory to the incumbent and very liable to cause friction. Much more needs to be done, therefore, in role-definition and in prescribing the delegation of tasks and responsibilities. As far as I have been able to think the matter through and gather ideas from staff, the following suggest themselves as a starter:-

- (i) Deputising for the Principal in his absence and also allowing the Principal to be more absent than has been possible in the past, either for leisure or to give him time to think widely around problems and tasks in the Community.
- (ii) Having a delegated responsibility for certain tasks. Boy intake is obviously one such task. Some aspects, at least, of staff selection and training might be another. Further tasks would probably emerge from a detailed consideration of the Principal's present role.
- (iii) Deputising for other staff when required, for example, the Bursar, the Head of the Polytechnic and the Heads of Group Living Units. This would relieve stress all round, it seems to me, since very difficult situations can develop when any one of these people is away and especially if his absence is unplanned.

The difficulties in job definition are reflected in the difficulty in finding an appropriate title. At present I have no idea other than Deputy Principal, which has the advantage of conferring status although it has all the disadvantages of the traditional overtones of the title.

2) The Bursar's Relationship with the Wiltshire County Council

One might summarise the difficulties we discussed in terms of the Community still being to some extent caught up in the traditional public authority type of administration and control even if, in some ways, there has been very considerable departure from customary practices. As I listened to Bill Douglas talking about the problem I recognised the patterns similar to those in other institutions in which I have worked, such as hospitals.

The problems appear to lie at the moment particularly in two areas, financial control and relationships with the Architect's Department.

I gather from Bill Douglas that Cotswold Community is in a unique position in the Wiltshire County Council among its Children's Homes in that the Cotswold Community meets its costs from fees provided by other local authorities who send boys and not from Wiltshire County Council resources. This gives some degree of control to the Cotswold Community, a fact that may in itself cause some friction in the local authority, but the degree of control is not absolute and the County Council can, and does, take financial action which can disrupt financial planning within the Cotswold Community. Thus, when Bill Douglas had carefully planned his expenditure to match his resources, he found that the Wiltshire County Council had unexpectedly and without communication or consultation, added a large item to expenditure for building work not yet done which then made his accounts show a considerable deficit.

There seems to be some lack of clarity about financial control over property maintenance which is paid for from fees although the property belongs to the Wiltshire County Council. A particular problem arose over the rebuilding of Springfield when, I gather, that fire insurance premiums were paid from fees but when the claim was made the payments went to the Wiltshire County Council who thereafter controlled the spending of the money. The ensuing difficulties then involved the Architect's Department and the rebuilding of Springfield was both extremely delayed and very expensive.

This illustrates the difficulties, in general, with the Architect's Department that work is done slowly, without the Cotswold Community having much control over the process and is felt as unnecessarily expensive. The work done in Larkrise points this up by contrast and could well be used as an object lesson to the local authority. In general, communication is very difficult with the architect's department in both directions, leading to a great deal of frustration and unnecessary and disruptive delays in getting work done. The problem is greater with the Architect's Department than with any other local authority department.

I hope this gives a fair account of the kind of difficulties. It is hard to estimate how much further the Cotswold Community can hope to go in devising a financial control system still more deviant from customary practice. I think it is worth trying although this particular experiment is not an inevitable part of the work of the Cotswold Community. I think it may very well be important to demonstrate that more unorthodox practices are, in fact, more efficient and cheaper.

With both finance and the Architectural Department the first line of action would seem to be an attempt to work the problems through with the people concerned and come to an agreement with them. If that fails then I would suppose that the next resort would need to be to the Management Committee. In this case strong arguments for further change would lie in the repercussions of administrative practices on the therapeutic task and also – strongly – the excessive expense in some cases of current procedures, e.g. again comparing the building of Larkrise with the rebuilding of Springfield.

3) The Domestic Bursar's and the Assistant Domestic Bursar's Role

Barbara Marin has had a difficult time in getting into role, her difficulties being increased by the lack of adequate staffing in her department. She is appreciative of the generous help given by Laura Crump and Pat Hancock but it has not been, and cannot be, enough. The Domestic Bursar needs a full-time resident Assistant Domestic Bursar if her role is not to become oppressive. What Barbara Martin found particularly trying is that she never really feels free when she is on the Community premises, nor does she feel free to leave the premises except for her weekly one-and-half day break. She also misses the weekends she had off when she was a Domestic Organiser in a Group Living Unit. I think there have been a combination of factors here beside the obvious fact that she had no Assistant/Deputy. I suspect, though without a lot of hard evidence, that her coming into role may have led to an abnormal number of calls on her – a kind of test-out. She certainly said that she had a lot of calls at first for supplies and so on when she was technically “off-duty” in her own quarters, but this has dropped off recently. Perhaps Barbara Martin herself was somewhat over-conscientious and inclined to over-respond to inappropriate dependency on her. I have discussed this with her. For example, it seems to me that the Domestic Organisers have the responsibility to see that they get the supplies they need at the proper times and to take the consequences themselves if they do not, without recourse to the Domestic Bursar. She has also found the telephone duties onerous, as tying her to her flat but giving also a feeling of aimlessness while she was there. She has herself said that she likes a job, where she works very hard and possibly with long and irregular hours, but where she is very definitely free when she is not working. I think her expressed wish for more definite free time is legitimate and it is urgent to create conditions for it by getting another residential person and perhaps looking again at the planning of telephone duties.

Barbara Martin welcomed the idea that Jeanne Slinger might come into the Domestic Bursar role. Her feeling, which I would go along with, was that it would be appropriate for Jeanne Slinger to take on the management components of the role, e.g. attending senior staff meetings, controlling general deployment of domestic staff, work with Domestic Organisers, and so on, while Barbara Martin would have responsibility for the store/laundry/sewing room complex and kitchens. We incidentally had a discussion to help her clarify the role of the “shop” in the Community. Within this division of labour both would deputise fully for the other while off-duty.

I was not sure how far Barbara Martin went here in her thinking, or how far she was aware that she seemed to be really suggesting that Jeanne Slinger become Domestic Bursar and Barbara Martin, Assistant Domestic Bursar. I think this would be appropriate but I also think this would need to be clarified with Barbara Martin. I do not think that they could have fully-shared non-specific responsibility for the whole area; someone must have ultimate responsibility to the Principal, i.e. the Domestic Bursar. As Barbara Martin envisages the division of responsibilities, this would be Jeanne Slinger.

4) Larkrise

My main point here is to offer congratulations to all concerned, both to those staff like Richard Balbernie and Bill Douglas who have managed to develop with the local authority a setting for this work and to all staff and boys who have been involved in its development. This is the kind of activity we have all wanted to see for a long time. I need not stress the significance of offering boys this opportunity to build something of their own to see the very creative outcome.

In detail I was impressed also by the imagination that had gone into the physical planning. I liked the kitchen/dining/TV arrangement which keeps the Domestic Organiser, or other people working in the kitchen, much more in touch with boys in the house and agree with the idea that it is important to leave the sitting-room TV free for other more creative activities like talking and games.

It is important also that the development of the new Unit provides an opportunity for re-viewing management systems. It is very early days yet and the team is not fully integrated, but they are certainly working at their management system. I did not have much opportunity to discuss this in detail with them but will look forward to hearing more about it later.

5) Tavistock Contract

I had some discussion with Richard Balbernie about the renewal of the Tavistock Institute's contract with the Wiltshire County Council for Consultancy in the Cotswold Community. For my part I wanted to be sure that my services would continue to be useful and also to investigate how far the work could be taken back into the management system in the Cotswold Community. A. K. Rice had always stressed the importance of management of innovation as part of the management task. After discussion we seemed agreed that there is a good deal of managerial development to be done in the next year and that, at present, Richard Balbernie is not free enough to do it himself, (see above the discussion of the Deputy Principal). With the Bursar, we then agreed to ask the Wiltshire County Council for a contract for the next year (1.11.75 – 31.10.76) to cover nine days' Consultancy at a fee to be increased commensurately with the increase in fees for the other Consultants, i.e. an increase of 20% to £90 per day. The contract would then be reviewed again at the end of the year.

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