

When Sally Churchward drops into Ringwood's Lantern Community she is impressed to find such a tight-knit safe haven, where people with disabilities and special needs can thrive, and where their talents can be nurtured

A SHINING EXAMPLE

It's just a short walk for Gareth from his shared house to the bakery where he has worked for 15 years. He loves his work and takes pride in his baking; his speciality is bread rolls covered in seeds.

And given the steady flow of customers through the bakery doors, he has good reason to be proud.

His neighbour, Stephen, works at the nearby shop. He has lived in the 'village' for more than 20 years – all his adult life.

It's clear that he enjoys his job – working on the till, restocking shelves and chatting to customers.

Stephen is also a skilled weaver and often spends part of his day in the weaving workshop, making fine napkins and tablecloths.

Gareth and Stephen are among the 39 adults with learning difficulties who live at the Lantern Community in the New Forest near Ringwood.

The community provides adults with learning disabilities the chance to be part of a community, where they undertake work and are in a safe, supported environment.

It consists of eight houses on site and one nearby, and has nine workshops, offering a range of activities including everything from working in the coffee shop to making delicate pottery jewellery.

Everything made in the workshops is sold in the well-stocked shop, from handmade yurts to cushion covers.

The community has a fantastic atmosphere – it feels a million miles away from the busy A31 that passes nearby.

On the day I visited, many of the residents – known as companions – were busy preparing for their open day. I admit to being pretty stunned by the quality of work they were producing and the skills the companions have developed, as I watched them hand-weave beautiful fabrics, mould attractive vases and hammer quirky furniture.

"Everyone here is involved in purposeful

work," explained Emma Borbely, day services manager.

"Everyone has that need to be involved in something and to have a purpose in their lives. People can really grow here. Often their parents don't think their children will be able to do certain things and they are amazed at what they learn to do.

"It's key that the activities here aren't just for entertainment – they are meaningful work."

The workshops are attended by 11 people who don't live on site as well as the 39 who do.

The community is also made up of some 55 paid members of staff, a few of whom live on site, and volunteers.

The companions live in houses of two to six people and the houses are looked after by a house coordinator and support workers. Most of the residents are single, but some are dating and there is one engaged couple who live together.

Community is an important part of life.

Each morning starts with all the companions getting together in the 'gathering room' and there are monthly meetings to allow the residents to decide what direction the community should go in.

"The ethos is about people living and working together and recognising the need of each person," said Emma.

"It's not about seeing their disabilities but rather their abilities and helping to bring out the best in people."



From top to bottom:
Kirsty in the pottery workshop; Stephen in the shop; Potter Andre Burbely with Neil; Nina weaves on a loom



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FEATURE

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She added that the community can offer people a lot more independence than living in one of the nearby towns.

"People who live in a town might not be able to leave their house without a support worker, whereas here all these folk can walk to work and can pop home at lunchtime then off to another workshop. I think this offers a lot more independence."

The Lantern Community is a Camphill Community. This is a worldwide movement which is dedicated to community living that supports and values the contributions of all community participants, regardless of their intellectual or physical capabilities.

The first Camphill Community was founded by Dr Karl König, an Austrian paediatrician and educator, who fled the Nazi invasion of his own country and settled in Aberdeen with a group of young physicians, artists and caregivers. These individuals founded the first Camphill Community with children who had learning disabilities.

The Lantern Community has a Christian ethos but Emma emphasised that people from all faiths and backgrounds are welcome.

The community started out as one house with six residents and has grown over the years to nine houses.

And ten years of fundraising to build a new craft centre are currently coming to fruition, with the building work well under way. When this is completed further accommodation will become available.

People tend to stay in the community for the long term – the oldest resident is over 60. It's easy to see why. It feels like an ideal community, that anyone would enjoy living in.

In a sense it offers a slightly old fashioned way of life – championing British arts and crafts, dedicating time to producing high quality work, offering a sense of connectedness to the land and placing high value on both the individual and the community.

The Lantern Community used to be known as the 'hidden village' but over recent years it has been increasingly opening its doors to the wider community; through its cafe, shop and open days, and there are hopes to hold craft workshops for the public once the new craft centre opens.

It is a popular destination for those looking to buy bargain plants or beautiful handcrafted gifts or popping in for a snack at the bustling coffee shop.

And perhaps part of its appeal, beyond the purchases and refreshments, is the chance to connect to a community that feels so special.

"This isn't an institution – it's a way of life," said Emma.

"It's a way of living, working and sharing together in a setting that hopefully brings out the best in people."

The Lantern Community is located off the B3081 near Ringwood. For more information, visit lanterncommunity.org.uk



From top to bottom:
Gareth in the bakery;
workshops co-ordinator
Emma Burbely; Doug with
tutor Pete Griffon making
a chair in the nursery;
Gareth, Clare and Lee in
the bakery; Stasi makes
a game with volunteer
Arwen in the nursery;
The Lantern Nursery

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