Managing Conflicts: 5 core principles and 4 key stages

Summary
This CohesionActionNet briefing sets out the five core principles of understanding and dealing with conflicts in communities and the four key stages of managing those conflicts: detecting early warning signs, bringing residents together, mediation and capacity building, and working with the media.

A considerable body of international literature and practice exists on conflict resolution methods. Closest to home, approaches to mediating between entrenched interests in the search for common ground and ultimately a peaceful resolution has found its most frequent and pressing expression in Northern Ireland. Other countries divided by conflict, in which some people at least want to move towards peace and eventually transformation such as South Africa, Colombia and the countries of the Middle East, have been the arenas for much discourse, innovation and developing practice on conflict resolution.

Few neighbourhoods in mainland Britain are likely to have conflicts on the scale of some of these countries. On the other hand, assuming that the neighbourhoods, towns and cities of Britain are immune to conflict would be inaccurate and unsafe. Even though the scale or nature of the problem may not be so great, a good deal of learning from these more high profile settings about how to manage and resolve conflict is still relevant in mainland Britain.

**Five fundamental principles** derived from the evidence are suggested:

1. Conflict is not inherently destructive but a **normal aspect** of any vibrant community. The danger of viewing conflict as inherently negative is that attempts to avoid or suppress it at all costs are justified and problems are left to fester, while resolution is postponed perhaps indefinitely or until the problem can no longer be ignored. Avoiding conflict may also lead to ignoring or suppressing legitimate differences in values and lifestyles, which, through negotiation, could be accommodated, accepted and perhaps even valued.

2. A thorough and comprehensive **analysis of the causes, conditions and manifestations** of the conflict taking all the different perceptions and perspectives seriously should inform conflict resolution activities. Superficial and one-sided assumptions invariably lead to counterproductive interventions.
3. Conflict resolution processes should be **inclusive of all parties** that are involved.

4. Conflict resolution activities should take place with the **consent** of and preferably at the invitation of the various protagonists.

5. The mediators or other third parties who intervene should be **non-partisan and unbiased** in their relationship with the disputing parties. The respective roles of conflict resolution and advocacy should be distinguished and preferably not be performed by the same bodies.

Odendaal, from whose work on inter-ethnic conflict the above is adapted, also points out: ‘Conflict resolution interventions are in essence about empowering disputants to deal more creatively with their conflict.’

Organisations that specialise in conflict resolution broadly have the following **6 options** available:

1. the facilitation of communication between parties in conflict when levels of antagonism make normal communication difficult or impossible

2. the facilitation of an analysis of the causes of conflict, preferably as a joint effort involving all the relevant participants

3. the creation of a safe environment (politically and psychologically) in a workshop setting that will enable participants to test their own assumptions and explore different options

4. the broadening of the range of options available to participants by facilitating the exploration of approaches in other places and historical experience of the resolution of conflict

5. the provision of training in conflict resolution skills, including skills to deal with deeply ingrained perceptions

6. The facilitation of opportunities to reflect on participants’ experiences in the past and to draw lessons from that.

Conflict resolution and the literature about it, perhaps inevitably, have given rise to a bewildering array of **terminology**. Each expert in the field might also use the terms differently depending on the type of dispute they are dealing with as well as taking into account their personal perspectives. The following terms are all, to varying degrees, in common currency: conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution, crisis management, dispute resolution, peace building, preventive diplomacy, negotiation, mediation, conciliation, reconciliation, or
facilitation. Each term does not stand alone however. It will also embrace a range of sub-categories, for example ‘mediation’ can be: interest-based, rights-based, transformative, evaluative, narrative, determinative, integrative.

Conflict resolution approaches seek to identify common ground and, if differences persist, to encourage empathy about other perspectives. If one of the main tasks of conflict resolution is to create for each side a feeling of security, the focus should then be on transforming group psychology, redefining group identities in ways that do not threaten other groups. Getting the sides to agree on anything, ‘even if it is just about the weather’ gives the sides a feeling for agreeing and finding mutually acceptable solutions, which may in fact be a completely new experience for them. Some of this thinking has begun to infuse policy or practice in mainland Britain in neighbourhood and community contexts.

**Detecting early warning signs**
Aside from the local residents, community conflicts are likely to come first to the notice of police or social landlords. They are likely to be the recipients of reports of trouble and to make the links and discern the patterns to recognise that the incidents being reported to them are not one off examples of anti-social behaviour but may be the signs of a more deep-seated conflict.

According to research by the University of Ulster, early warning signs of potential community conflict might include:
- increases in reported racist incidents, racial harassment and racially motivated crime;
- transient populations, both resident and in public spaces;
- drug and alcohol activity in public places
- lack of social capital: people don’t know or help their neighbours; don’t participate in local activities or organisations; resentment against newcomers particularly those from diverse backgrounds
- increases in violent offences; and
- increases in criminal damage.

**Bringing local residents together**
If trust has not completely broken down and conflict has not yet got entirely out of hand, there is obvious merit in bringing local people together. Bringing as many local people together as possible from the widest range of interest groups is highly desirable.

A good turnout is essential. Attendance only by those who regularly come to meetings discussing the usual complaints, however, is not likely to be a discussion that will lead to much in the way of conflict resolution.
In the first instance people will want to raise their concerns and may be initially reluctant to move too quickly to discuss what should be done to address them. There is some therapeutic value in airing differences, so long as the discussion is managed to prevent the temperature rising and tempers flaring.

At the early stages the highest aspiration for meetings might be that people agree to meet and talk again. Local agencies can also share with local residents their current activities to deal with problems. This will help to combat the feeling that nothing is being done and nobody cares. Limitations should be acknowledged but insistent negativity or indifference from professionals who live elsewhere is not likely to be well received. Public meetings such as these should be seen as the beginning of a conflict resolution process, not an end in themselves.

Little progress is likely to be made in public meetings if local agencies are seeking to deal with longstanding or entrenched conflicts. The protagonists are unlikely to attend and even if they do, the conflict may well flare in the meeting. Intractable conflicts like these will have to be addressed, at least in the early stages, in separate meetings with the protagonists.

**Mediation and Capacity Building**

Mediation has been used with varying degrees of success in many different kinds of conflicts including interpersonal, family, peer mediation in schools, labour and industrial relations, community, environmental and international disputes. The secret of effective mediation is unsurprisingly the mediator. Many mediation processes break down because the mediator is neither sufficiently skilled nor credible, or both. Mediation has been defined as:

‘A process in which the parties to a dispute, with the assistance of a neutral third party (the mediator), identify the disputed issues, develop options, consider alternatives and endeavour to reach an agreement. The mediator has no advisory or determinative role in regard to the content of the dispute or the outcome of its resolution, but may advise on or determine the process of mediation whereby resolution is attempted.’

Traditionally mediation has been used in one-to-one neighbour disputes, but in recent years a small number of mediators have begun to work on a larger scale, intervening in community conflicts. Some mediation has taken place between different racial or ethnic minority groups or young people in opposing gangs.

Mediation involves interviewing all those affected individually in the first instance, including the agencies involved or those that may make a contribution to improving the situation or resolving the problem. Once the initial meetings have
been held a further series of meetings can either then be held between representatives of the opposing groups or a wider public meeting might be held bringing the groups together. All involved need to feel that they can have their say and express their fears and concerns without being judged or criticised straightaway. In addition they also need to accept that they have some responsibility in moving the situation forward and finding a resolution.

A Liverpool housing association landlord has found that mediation is one of the most effective ways of addressing conflicts early. According to a housing manager who participated in this research:

“Problems tend to be in the more deprived areas where some people can’t articulate their feelings in a logical way and negotiating their way out of a problem can be harder and so can flare up into abuse and violence.”

Intervention by a mediator to try and carry the message between two parties is effective and helpful in bringing about a mutual understanding. Two parties can come together, facilitated by a mediator and can talk through their problems with each other. The scheme seems to be effective because it does not have someone who has a vested interest in the conflict negotiating between the two parties.

Local capacity building whereby residents may also be offered training in mediation and conflict management and resolution skills could enable them to manage conflicts constructively within their neighbourhoods without resort to agencies or other outside help. Interventions can be made at an earlier stage of the conflict; also the community itself is more empowered and sustainable. For example, the tenant participation officer at Herefordshire Housing has organized conflict resolution skills training for residents who are community leaders. The training involves a theatre company and role-playing activities.

**Working with the media**

The local press can exacerbate unfounded fears. On the other hand, if they are judiciously involved and thoroughly briefed they can also contribute to dismantling myths and concerns. They can, for example, highlight the real circumstances of asylum seekers and seek to dispel assumptions that they are receiving disproportionate local and central government funding or services. The media can also be used for positive publicity to promote and gain support for effective measures an organisation or partnership might have taken, for example regarding community safety or regeneration. Nick Carter, the editor of the *Leicester Mercury* newspaper told a House of Commons select committee how the local media plays a role in community cohesion:

“It may be easy to sell newspapers in the wake of trouble within communities, but that is a very short term benefit … Fragmented
communities contain people who are less likely to want to get involved in what is happening in these communities, they are full of suspicion and apprehension … Fewer people are likely to be interested in what is going on around them and since we are the main provider of news and information about those communities we are less likely to have people turning to us for information. A cohesive community is a community which feels comfortable with itself, its people are involved in what is happening in those communities … they are more likely to turn to their local newspaper and to other sources of local information to find out what is happening …We work harder to look for the positives in our communities – particularly where they demonstrate that people from different communities are living and working together … We are more aware of those small groups of extremists who want divide our communities and spread fear and suspicion … We have to spend more time thinking about the consequences of everything we do.”

**Conclusion**

CohesionActionNet gives you and your organisation password-protected access to managed knowledge about:

- Working closely with community members involved in conflict through community participation, area management and by using conflict resolution.
- Developing an effective cohesion policy and working in partnerships.
- Meeting all relevant regulation and inspection requirements.
- Preventing conflict from arising through improved housing management.
- Coping with local problems involving young people - including gangs, racial divisions, underage drinking and inter-generational tensions - and developing effective preventative projects.
- Tackling open and closed drug markets and drug-related crime.
- Reducing conflict between people of different race or religion - including conflicts involving white people, black and minority ethnic people, Gypsy and Traveller communities and political and religious extremists.

See how CohesionActionNet could help you and your organisation to tackle community conflict and build cohesion. Take a free trial at [www.cohesionactionnet.org.uk](http://www.cohesionactionnet.org.uk)