

Community conversations

Building bridges between people from different backgrounds

Conflict and Change is a voluntary organisation that has developed innovative approaches to building understanding between communities since the 1980s. From April 2006, it piloted and developed, with the support of City Parochial Foundation, the community conversations project in Newham, London.

This project was initiated in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings as a response to urgent problems such as the rise in tensions between diverse communities and the need for better cross-community relations in a multicultural area of London. The idea was to increase understanding between communities by bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, who nevertheless shared the same neighbourhood, school or social concern, and were willing to participate in a structured conversation.

Conflict and Change has run over 70 conversations with between 4 and 20 participants each, testing in the process a variety of approaches and formats. In total, 500 participants were involved in these conversations.

It now wishes to share its learning about this approach to creating social cohesion, in the hope that others throughout the country will be inspired to run community conversations of their own.

Key Learning Points

- A community conversation is a good starting point for those who want to bring about a sense of cohesion and togetherness.
- Community conversations impact on participants by finding common ground and increasing respect for difference.
- Good facilitation skills – including an ability to work with conflict – are essential to ensure that participation and energy remain high, and that every person's contribution is given value.
- It is helpful to develop and utilise partnerships with other agencies to help recruit participants and to ensure that there is a forum for any actions resulting from the conversations.
- The positive and future-focus of community conversations can enable participants to go on to take part in shared activities. In this event, it is helpful to provide training in facilitation skills to participants and to partner agency staff so that the inclusive approach can be taken forward.

Community conversations – bridges across difference

A community conversation is a meeting facilitated by a skilled practitioner that aims to give people who would not normally meet an experience of positive and meaningful interaction. Everyone participates and each contribution is valued and accepted. It is more than an informal chance to get to know neighbours as it aims to get people talking about local issues that matter to them, and includes the opportunity to express different experiences and views. The facilitator creates a space in which differences of opinion and normally unspoken feelings and resentments can be safely voiced and, at the same time, draws out hopes and dreams that people have in common.

Conversations can be one-off “get to know you” events to start people talking to each other or they can help to cement longer term relationships which lead to shared activities. Subject matter can focus on exploring the commonalities and differences between participants or it can focus on an issue of local concern such as safety, the local impact of international events, or plans for local regeneration.

In responding to the 7/7 bombings the project initially used a model of group dialogue – Public Conversations Project which was developed in the

USA to enable people to talk about very divisive issues. However, by the time funding had been secured the intense feelings around the bombings had subsided and the model didn't quite fit. Its carefully controlled structure was suitable for talking about “high risk” topics but worked less well when people from different communities just wanted to “break the ice”. A less formal model evolved for “Getting to know you” events.

However, in January 2009, when a crisis erupted in Gaza and again feelings were running high, a variant of the original model was effectively used.

The project now uses a different format depending on the context.

After each session a group go-round was conducted and this was followed up with phone calls to participants. The monitoring information Conflict and Change collected through these methods indicated that community conversations often impact strongly on participants. Together with an increased respect for difference, they discover their common ground. They enjoy getting to know immediate neighbours and often gain an increased feeling of belonging. This surge of energy can result in a commitment to long-term action.

Building bridges across ethnicities in North Woolwich

North Woolwich is a disadvantaged neighbourhood that has experienced demographic changes from predominantly white British to a more ethnically diverse neighbourhood. In liaison with centre staff, community conversations were set up in a

local community centre to encourage interaction between people of different ethnic backgrounds.

A diverse group of a dozen neighbours met for the first time; they were pleased to be talking together. After two conversations a group went on to plan a small street party together. The community conversations were then repeated with new people, following which, a larger event was organised that attracted 160 people from different backgrounds.

The community conversations created a setting for interaction and connections were quickly made. At the same time they offered a place to explore differences. A young Ugandan woman felt safer as the area received newcomers from ethnic minorities whereas a white British woman (Mrs T) experienced this change as the break up of her community. These two women were supported to keep a sense of curiosity about these differences without any blame or judgement. At the end of the session, Mrs T said: “We understood the problems that each side of the community have been having.”



Community conversations in practice

From its experience of running 70 community conversations Conflict and Change has found that the following steps work effectively:

Before/building links

- 1 Work with partners – established relationships with local contacts are essential. Partner agencies often have a diverse membership and can invite people from different backgrounds. They can also provide an appropriate space in which to hold the conversations and a context in which the relationships built can be sustainable. It is important to negotiate working together so that the experience and resources of the partner are fully used and that respective aims are clearly understood.
- 2 Face to face recruitment – recruitment works best when it is face to face, close to the date of the event and ideally with the support of dynamic local people with the will and personality to bring others in. An optimal size for a Community Conversation is 8 to 12 participants.

At the event

- 3 Create a relaxed setting – refreshments, food, and comfortable seating help to create an appropriate atmosphere.
- 4 Follow a set pattern – a tight structure helps to create a defined space, separate from everyday interactions, in which a different type of engagement is encouraged. This is especially important when divisive issues are being discussed and feelings are running high and less so for get-to-know-you events.
- 5 Facilitate with empathy, active listening and mediation. It is sometimes necessary to reframe words that are accusatory in a way that keeps the meaning but takes away the blame. If there is a group that is not represented at the conversation, the facilitator can consider bringing in their voice.

After one or two sessions

- 6 Promote self-sufficiency – a Community Conversation is a significant event in itself. However, to become a building block for longer-term group activity, it is important for the group members and any partner agency staff to recognise and understand the value of participatory and inclusive meetings, and to be in a position to facilitate future meetings in this way. It is therefore helpful to add an element of coaching and training.

Dealing with the local impact of an international event

The conflict in Gaza had a strong impact on Muslims in Newham. Together with local Muslim and inter-faith groups, Conflict and Change set up four community conversations to enable people to share their feelings and responses.

Talking about difficult issues in this structured fashion changed perceptions. There was a shift for Muslim participants from largely seeing it as a Muslim issue to one of human justice. The non-Muslims became aware of just how strongly the Muslims felt about the conflict and the strength of the international Muslim community.

The conversations energised many participants to want to take some constructive action about the situation, like creating a video of the conversation for YouTube, writing to their MPs, making links with Jewish groups and widening their understanding about the complexities of the situation.

“Before I came here, I didn’t know what I could do; the protests weren’t doing anything for me. I think hearing everyone’s ideas about what we can do is encouraging.”
(A participant)

The pattern of a community conversation

Community conversations have a format that enables participants to communicate more openly than in ordinary meetings and conversations. One of the keys to success is the chance for participants to express themselves and be listened to by the group without immediate comment. This encourages a more attentive type of listening than when people are focussing on their own response. There is space for open conversation after this phase of listening.

Conflict and Change has found that it works well for a facilitator to use:

- 1 An icebreaker to introduce people and encourage participation from the start.
- 2 A first question, which people respond to in pairs, either something positive like, "What do you like about living in this neighbourhood?" or when feelings are intense, "How is this situation affecting you?"
- 3 Group go-round to hear each response to the question. Contributions are affirmed and briefly summarised, but debate and comment are not invited. The facilitator empathises and draws out key themes, similarities and differences between the individuals. This is particularly important for more contentious/difficult meetings.
- 4 A second question linked to what has already been said and is framed using language that has come from the group such as "What ideas do you have to get this "community spirit" back?" or "What strikes you about x? Usually pairs or small groups briefly discuss this question before a group go-round.
- 5 Where relevant, small groups are asked to identify next steps that they can take about the topic, both as individuals and as a group.
- 6 A brief final go-round to reflect on the benefits of the session "What has been valuable about this meeting?"

A conversation between young and old



An inter-generational event was held at a Sheltered Accommodation between the residents and young people from a local youth group. This was the first of a series of events run by the local Regeneration worker to build better understanding between older and younger residents.

First of all, people of mixed ages sat around tables and had 10 minutes to draw all the lines of connection they could find on the paper table cloth with marker pens, for example their favourite foods and TV programmes. Then, everyone watched a film about the area in the 1940s and talked together about the differences they noticed between then and now. The facilitators acknowledged some of the key issues raised, namely that elderly people valued respect and politeness, that life is very

different now, that both young and old have fears about safety, and that young people like to have freedom and make choices.

At the end participants said what they enjoyed about the evening. The last comment was by a young boy, pleased that the elderly residents had showed the young ones respect. People laughed, as usually a request for respect is the other way round. An elderly lady agreed: "Yes, that's right – respect works both ways!"

The Regeneration worker reported a few months later that both parties are keen to sustain the relationship and that the local youth club was inviting the old people that were involved in the conversation for another get-together.

The wider policy context

- The issue of Community Cohesion is currently topical. Following the riots in some northern cities in 2001 the Cantle Report (2001) highlighted the need for more interaction between communities in all parts of the UK.
- Following further riots in 2005 the focus for policy makers was not only on integration, but also on “meaningful interaction” between different communities, premised on the notion of developing social capital.
- The Report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion has been welcomed by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), which has taken forward the concept of meaningful interaction in two recent publications.

The current national policy context, therefore, is one in which the Government is actively seeking and promoting practical approaches to meaningful interaction which can be implemented at local level by community practitioners. It is just such an approach which is offered by community conversations.

Conclusion

A Community Conversation is a good starting point for those who want to bring about a sense of cohesion and togetherness. Considerable scope exists for the model to be used within the statutory sector – for example, a council regeneration team that genuinely wants to hear a diversity of residents’ views, or a school with children from a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities that wants to create more of a community in its parent body. Similarly, community mediation services, community groups, places of worship, and residents associations can all encourage people to communicate on a deeper level about their concerns and hopes in order to value diversity, prevent conflict and build a solid foundation for joint activities.

Creating a community of parents



With the support of the school management and at the instigation of a parent, Conflict and Change set up a series of community conversations in a primary school with the support of the parents’ association that was small and active but not representative of the diversity within the school.

18 parents from a diversity of backgrounds came, delighted to have the chance to meet other parents. After the initial positive buzz, difficult issues were talked about. One concerned the lack of engagement and perceived unfriendliness of a newly-settled Eastern European group of parents. Another concerned the introduction of Halal meat in the school for all children. There was palpable relief at the chance to express such frustrations without being labelled as racist and shared recognition of the importance of everyone’s culture.

The parents association benefited from a surge of new and diverse parents. Together they organised a summer fair that, for the first time, involved all the main ethnic groups.

“I’ve noticed more people saying good morning to each other, or even just nodding to those they might not have done in the past.” (Staff member)

“I personally am more aware of the difficulties faced by the new Eastern European families that come to the school, and that they too want to be involved and feel that they could have a say.” (A parent)



About this document

The key learning points are a summary of the views of Conflict and Change staff and volunteers and feedback from participants based on the experience of undertaking this work. This document was commissioned by the City Parochial Foundation and written by independent consultant Dr Tanya Murphy (murphy.tanya@gmail.com).

Resources

St Ethelburgas: Guidelines for Listening Events, available at: www.stethelburgas.org/resources.htm

Community Power Pack, 2008, the Government Dept for Communities and Involvement, available at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitypowerpack>

PCP Dialogue Tool Box, the Public Conversations Project, available at: <http://www.publicconversations.org/upload/toolbox.pdf>

City Parochial Foundation

www.cityparochial.org.uk

City Parochial Foundation is a charitable organisation, established in 1891, that exists to reduce poverty and inequality in London. It does this by funding the voluntary and community sector and others, as well as by using its own expertise and knowledge to support work that tackles poverty and its root causes.

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Conflict & Change

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Conflict and Change has been running innovative projects in conflict resolution and cross-community understanding since 1984. Conflict and Change can provide training in running community conversations. It is developing a toolkit for practitioners.

The organisation is happy to share its experience of community conversations with others.

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