

We need to talk about.....



Talk for a Change

## We need to talk about.....

Can discussing controversial issues strengthen community relations?

### About Talk for a Change

Talk for a Change work alongside you and your communities to tackle tough local issues and build good relations. We work at strategic, operational and community levels, providing advice and coaching based on the most up to date policy and practice.

We can provide direct interventions on good relations, cohesion and conflict issues. We are experienced at facilitating dialogue, and can help you to build positive lasting local relationships that are resilient to challenges. We work towards the reduction of harmful conflict in communities and help transform conflictual situations.

We also provide training and support to residents, community leaders and activists, civil society and service provider organisations, statutory agencies and leaders in building good community relations.

We are able to undertake local and national research on matters related to good relations.

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# Acknowledgements

Our considerable thanks to Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust for a small grant to help us get underway with exploring this area, which we initially called Hope and Hot Potatoes.

Our thanks to our research participants, focus group members and people who provided case studies. Your time and wisdom has been a key resource in enabling us to explore this area in depth. These agencies were contributors:

Aik Saath

Alternatives to Violence Project, Northumberland

ARCH Newcastle upon Tyne

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Blackburn Cathedral

Burnley Council

Centre for Good Relations, Burnley

Citizens UK, London

Community Links

Community Resolve, Bristol

Dialogue Society, London

Foundation for Peace, Warrington

Institute of Community Cohesion

Kaizen Partnership

Khulisa

Kirklees Council

Leap Confronting Conflict

Leicester City Council

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Mediation Northern Ireland, Belfast

National Coalition Building Network, Lancashire

Newcastle Conflict Resolution Network

Newham Conflict and Change

Northern Friends Peace Board, Huddersfield  
People United  
Programme for a Peaceful City, Bradford  
Responding to Conflict, Birmingham  
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council  
St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation  
Three Faiths Forum  
Together for Peace, Leeds  
The Tutu Foundation  
Who Is Your Neighbour, South Yorkshire  
York Council  
Young Foundation

Our thanks to Ann Chapman for co- facilitating in Leeds.

Our thanks to Hen Wilkinson from Community Resolve, Michael Keating from London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and Ann Chapman for their feedback on the first draft.

Our thanks to Neil Denton of ARCH Newcastle, with whom Nicola has been discussing Difficult Debates for many years, and with whom some ideas have been tried and tested.

Our thanks to all those we have worked alongside over the last ten years in our work as specialist cohesion advisers. To the thousand or more local people we have trained as community champions and activists, and to CLG staff, Local authority, public and third sector staff we have collaborated with – you have been vital in helping us develop our understanding of the complexity and strong feelings associated with these issues. In particular Joe Micheli of Barnsley Metropolitan Borough council; Ashley Jarvis and Rob Walters of Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, and Fran Jones of London Borough of Tower Hamlets, for affording us the opportunity to develop in-depth programmes of work.

Our thanks to Professor Miles Hewstone for sending his latest publications and commenting on our use of contact theory, and to Professor Margaret Harris and Miriam Koshate for sharing their latest publications with us.

Our thanks to Katharine Galliver for practical help with publication and dissemination.

# Executive Summary

Our experience of working in 65 Local Authorities on good relations, integration and community cohesion<sup>1</sup> indicates that in every area there are controversial issues that people find it difficult to talk about. In some areas these conversations are handled well, in others they are poorly handled or avoided leaving residents frustrated, and creating the conditions for community tensions to escalate.

With a small grant from Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust we have examined the state of good community relations work in the UK, with particular reference to the following questions:

- Who is having these difficult conversations, whether intentionally or not?
- How do these conversations relate to strengthening good relations between different groups and communities?
- What kinds of talking work best and when is it best not to talk?
- How can we measure the impact of talking or not talking?
- What is needed to strengthen our skills to have these difficult conversations in a way that allows us to disagree with each other but doesn't harm community relations?

This executive summary presents our key findings. The full report discusses those findings in detail. Our methodology included a literature review, 34 interviews with a range of organisations involved in this work, two focus groups, and many informal conversations at events and conferences addressing community relations issues.

We have also drawn on our experience over the past ten years working as specialist cohesion advisors in a wide range of very different local areas.

## Introduction

In this section we outline our research – our approach, and methodology, and our key questions.

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<sup>1</sup> From 2001 - 2010

## Chapter 1: Setting the context

This chapter outlines the context for community relations work in England, with a brief summary of the history of good relations work, particularly over the last ten years. It also discusses the political and economic pressures currently impacting on community relations.

## Chapter 2: What are the controversial issues and why are they difficult to talk about?

Key Findings:

- The following are identified as reasons for controversial issues not being tackled: fear that talking might make things worse; not having the skills and confidence to talk, in particular dealing with strong feelings; not having the time or resource to deal with issues properly; a lack of support from community leaders.
- There are a number of narratives which are problematic for good community relations. Some of these narratives are directly divisive, others more subtly erode individual and community resilience and hope. Our research identified the following narrative themes: unfairness and entitlement, prejudice, belonging and identity, distrust and powerlessness and resentment.
- Local, national and international triggers can cause an escalation in tensions locally, where one or more of these problematic narratives are present.
- Different narratives predominate in different localities dependant on local socio-economic, demographic, and geographical factors. Therefore what is a controversial topic in one local area may not be in another.
- Structural inequality and the impact of the current economic crisis are key drivers of these narratives<sup>2</sup>. The pressure on individuals and communities is likely to intensify as the recession deepens, and the specialist skills of community relations workers may become increasingly relevant.

## Chapter 3: Who is having the difficult conversations, intentionally or not?

Key Findings:

- There are a range of organisations and agencies addressing these narratives, and they fall into two broad categories.

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<sup>2</sup> Garner, S. White working class neighbourhood: Common themes and policy suggestions 2011 Joseph Rowntree Foundation <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/white-working-class-neighbourhoods>



- The first we have called specialist organisations. Their specific purpose is to work with communities to build better community relations, whether they do this through bonding work – work within a particular identity group; or through bridging work – work which brings different identity groups together.
- The second we have called generalists – this is a much wider group of individuals, organisations and agencies who are delivering services in local areas, or undertaking social action. In this group are public service agencies, charities and voluntary organisations. Community relations work is not their main area of concern, but their work will impact on community relations in both positive and negative ways. Some generalists understand their local area well, and have developed skills for facilitating controversial issues, and taking community relations concerns into account in their plans and projects. There are also examples where controversial issues are ignored, avoided or poorly handled.
- There are different models of specialist organisations. These include those which are locally rooted, within a particular local area; those which operate on a project by project basis across England; and local networks which serve a local area such as a whole town or a city. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. Whilst it is clear that local solutions and approaches are not directly transferable to other areas, there is much that could be learnt from sharing models across regions and nationally.
- All of the specialists we spoke to and some of the generalists, share belief in the power of dialogue, the importance of building community voice and agency, and the benefits of increasing understanding between communities and groups of different backgrounds. Although there are subtle differences in how they define and describe their work they have broadly similar approaches, methodologies, and values, and would benefit from collaboration and the development of a collective voice for good relations work.

## Chapter 4: Can talking about controversial issues improve community relations?

### Key Findings:

- There is anecdotal evidence from our interviews, our focus groups and our own experience that talking about controversial issues can strengthen community relations. There is research that underpins this approach, however there is, to date, little actual

evidence of the impact of dialogue around controversial issues and its benefit on community relations.

- Research into contact theory has consistently demonstrated that intergroup contact can, in certain circumstances, reduce anxiety and hostility between different groups, and increase empathy and understanding, with friendships between people from different groups being a particularly powerful change factor<sup>3</sup>.
- Recent research has also demonstrated that intergroup contact can have further benefits, such as reducing prejudice in family, friends and peers of those involved; and reducing prejudice towards other groups, for those involved<sup>4</sup>.
- There are benefits to informal contact, such as conversations between neighbours, or parents at the school gates, these interactions, though not controversial, can help form the social glue that binds communities together<sup>5</sup>.
- The literature suggests that there are benefits to being ‘pro-disagreement’ and ‘pro-conversation’, and that these outweigh the risks of dialogue<sup>6</sup>.
- Poor past experiences of being involved in dialogue can influence people’s engagement. In particular where dialogue has been used poorly, or cynically, for example, to demonstrate that communities have been engaged.
- Local community leaders are highly influential in whether or not controversial issues are tackled well.
- Poorly managed intergroup contact and dialogue can be harmful. The conditions of dialogue, including the skill of facilitators, and what happens post-dialogue are crucial in determining success.

## Chapter 5: How to address controversial issues – learning to sit in the fire

Key Findings:

- Practitioners, participants and academics report that overall the benefits of dialogue outweigh the dangers, provided that issues are surfaced in a timely and skilful way. In

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<sup>3</sup> M. Hewstone, 2009 . Living apart, Living together? The Role of Intergroup Contact in Social Integration. Proceedings of the British Academy, 2009, 162, 243-300.

<sup>4</sup> K Schmid, M Hewstone, B Kuppe, A Zick, U Wagner, Secondary Transfer effects of intergroup contact: a cross national comparison in Europe. Social Psychology Quarterly 2012/75:28

<sup>5</sup> H. Beider (2011) Community cohesion: the views of white working-class communities, neighbourhood, cohesion and change. JRF. p8 <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/working-class-views-neighbourhood>

<sup>6</sup> P.T. Neisser (2006) Political Polarization as disagreement failure. Journal of Public Deliberation, 2.(1) 2006

particular dialogue that is skilfully facilitated can build trust between communities, and between communities and local providers and institutions.

- There is a set of specific skills and processes for facilitating dialogue and building community relations. These skills and processes can be learnt, and there are examples of local areas who have built their capacity and resource for addressing controversial issues, and increasing individual and community voice and agency.
- Knowing and understanding your local area is vital. There are a range of ways of staying informed. Hate crime and tension monitoring information, local intelligence, and local community activists all play a part.
- Engaging people in a process of change, using tools to help analysis, being clear about purpose, whilst accepting that the purpose may evolve as the process does, are all crucial in terms of preparing for dialogue.
- Preparation of participants should include a focus on listening, and the likelihood of disagreement and strong feelings being expressed. Facilitators need to consider their role, the appropriateness of challenging controversial views, and what happens afterwards
- A neutral location for dialogue is important, where individuals feel comfortable and safe
- The importance of timing – how to assess when the situation is ripe for talking.
- Participants need to feel that they are in safe hands, so facilitators need to be skilled and competent, in particular in creating a safe space for controversial issues to be expressed and explored, in working with deeply held feelings and opinions, and in supporting participants to keep talking even though it is difficult.
- There are a range of activities, groupwork exercises, questioning techniques used by practitioners to help air the controversial issues and to aid productive exploration and expression.

## Chapter 6: Key challenges for good relations work

Key Findings:

- Our research highlights four main challenges facing good relations work at present:
- The promotion of divisive narratives and in particular the role of the media in this process. An emerging challenge for good relations practitioners is how to engage in online dialogue and debate around controversial issues. It is much easier to express prejudice and hatred from behind the safety of the keyboard.

- Research participants told us about a pervading sense of hopelessness in many communities and its consequent impact on community relations. This is echoed by our own experience of working in diverse communities across England, and more recently by the final report of the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel<sup>7</sup> whose description of the lack of hope experienced by many young people in our most deprived areas makes chilling reading. Although there are many stories of individuals who are energetic and passionate in the service of their communities the challenge of building resilient, hopeful communities will become increasingly urgent as the impact of the economic situation continues to unfold.
- Measuring the impact of good relations work is problematic for a number of reasons:
  - change can be gradual and may be cumulative over time
  - there is a need for both individual and community level indicators and approaches
  - it is hard to disaggregate the factors that make a difference
  - it is often about measuring intangibles
  - time and resource issues for small organisations,

There are organisations and agencies who have made good efforts to address some of these challenges and further progress needs to be made.
- Many of the specialist organisations we spoke to are under threat and facing reductions to their budgets. In addition public sector agencies are also reducing services and making cuts. We would not wish to argue a special case for community relations work when so many services are being reduced. However, there is a real concern that some of the specialist knowledge, expertise and skills that have been developed over the last ten years in particular may get lost. This at a time when pressure on individuals and communities is at its highest for decades, with the consequent risk of community tension and conflict.

## Chapter 7: Looking Forward

We explore potential areas for development including:

- The development of a national voice for good relations work
- Improving the way we measure impact
- Linking practice to research more closely
- Dissemination of skills and expertise

We conclude with a discussion about building hope and resilience.

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<sup>7</sup> Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012) After the Riots.

# Introduction

**This section outlines our research - its parameters, our approach and methodology.**

## Background to our research

For nine years<sup>8</sup> we worked as specialist cohesion advisers for the Department of Communities and Local Government, offering advice and practical support to 65 Local Authorities to help improve community cohesion in their area. We worked in areas with very different characteristics and challenges; some with majority white populations, where if you came from a village a mile away you were thought of as 'not from around here', to urban areas with over 40 different languages spoken in local schools, to traditional seaside towns who had experienced decades of decline and were struggling with transient communities of vulnerable and marginalized people.

In every area we became aware that there are some issues people find really hard to talk about, because talking about them produces or surfaces conflict and tensions. Topics such as identity difference, immigration, trust in local institutions and other people, housing allocation, fairness and unfairness. These are topics where there is contradictory information in the media, and where people quickly retreat into their usual positions, and defend their views.

We have found that underneath the controversial issues is an underbelly of feelings that fuel the ferocity of the debates. Those of us who are engaged in communities need to have recourse to our competent, skilful, selves in order to pick our way successfully through these conversations. Yet they are the conversations that are most likely to leave us feeling incompetent and defeated.

## Research Questions

In early 2010 we applied for and received funds from JRCT to research these controversial issues and their impact on community relations work. We wanted to find answers to the following questions:

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<sup>8</sup> from 2001 to 2010

- Who is having these difficult conversations, whether intentionally or not?
- How do these conversations relate to strengthening good relations between different groups and communities?
- What kinds of talking work best and when is it best not to talk?
- How can we measure the impact of talking or not talking?
- What is needed to strengthen our skills to have these difficult conversations in a way that allows us to disagree with each other but doesn't harm community relations?

## Methodology

We have undertaken a literature review, 34 interviews with a range of organisations involved in this work<sup>9</sup>, and two focus groups; one focus group in Leeds and one in London<sup>10</sup>. The skills, knowledge, dedication and experience of our research participants has been a key resource in our exploration of this area. Thank you.

Where appropriate we have also drawn on our own experience of working as cohesion specialists, with a background in conflict transformation approaches and practices.

There are many aspects to this issue which were outside our research brief. We offer this report in the spirit of a mutual inquiry into how to build more hopeful resilient communities. We recognise that many people are thinking and talking about these issues, and we add our findings to the mix. We hope this is useful to practitioners, policy makers and grant making trusts. We look forward to discussing the issues with you over coming months.

### **Please note:**

**Italics in the text indicate a quote from a research participant.**

**Any other quotes are referenced in the usual way.**

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<sup>9</sup> 34 organisations in total, two thirds of which are specialist to the good relations field.

<sup>10</sup> 16 people representing 15 organisations participated in the focus groups.

# 1 Setting the context

**This chapter offers a definition of good relations work, examines the history of this work in England, and explores the current context.**

## A definition

For the purposes of this report we offer the following definition of good relations work; activities which aim to build more engaged, resilient and cohesive neighbourhoods. This work could be focused around ethnicity, race or faith. However, it could just as well focus on differences of age, class, geography etc. The work involves engaging groups and communities in activities that support them to know and understand each other better, to develop voice and agency for change, and awareness and empathy across divides. This may include directly engaging communities and groups in conversations about controversial issues.

## A brief history of good relations work

Since the idea of 'good relations' work was enshrined in British law in the 1960s successive governments, through programmes such as the Race Equality Councils, the Commission on Race Equality, and various neighborhood regeneration initiatives have focused attention on the need to foster and promote good race relations.

This focus intensified after the disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in 2001. Professor Ted Cantle's report into the underlying causes coined the term 'community cohesion', and identified the 'parallel lives' led by Asian and White communities as a key factor in the escalation of tensions<sup>11</sup>. As a result work on community cohesion was prioritized by the government and included as part of their wider Neighbourhood Renewal Programme which concentrated resources on the improvement of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England.

Between 2001 and 2010 there has been some excellent research into the factors that hinder

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<sup>11</sup> Cantle, T. (2001) The Cantle Report - Community Cohesion. Institute of Community Cohesion.

and help different groups and communities to get on well with each other. For the first time government tried to measure the correlations between structural inequality and the extent to which people did or did not get on with their neighbours, felt a sense of belonging to their local area and trusted their local institutions and services. What emerged was a complex set of factors that impact on community relations with diversity generally positively impacting on cohesion and deprivation generally having a negative effect, (though there are exceptions)<sup>12</sup>.

The research of social psychologists such as Miles Hewstone<sup>13</sup>, which we examine in Chapter 4, highlights the importance of meaningful interaction in developing positive relationships across difference.

Other research noted that we were moving into an age of 'superdiversity'<sup>14</sup>. Whereas in the previous 50 years patterns of migration to the UK were primarily from formerly colonized countries, this changed with the opening up of European borders, and the impact of international wars on the movement of populations. Some areas within the UK experienced rapid population churn and change and our understanding about identity was developing, 'people's identities are multi-layered and single identities do not capture people's sense of who they really are'<sup>15</sup>.

The London bombings in July 2005, and the knowledge that the perpetrators had been born in the UK and radicalized here caused the government to intensify the focus on extremism in Muslim communities with the highly controversial 'Prevent' agenda.

In 2009 - 2010 several pieces of research were published which focused on the disenfranchisement and disengagement of white working class communities<sup>16,17</sup>. This together with the growing influence of the English Defence League with its specific anti-muslim rhetoric lead the government to widen the Prevent agenda to focus in addition on all

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<sup>12</sup> Laurence, J. & Heath, A. Predictors of community cohesion: multi-level modelling 2005 Citizenship Survey (2008) [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/predictorscohesion](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/predictorscohesion)

<sup>13</sup> M. Hewstone, 2009, Living apart, Living together? The Role of Intergroup Contact in Social Integration. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 2009, 162, 243-300.

<sup>14</sup> 'Super-diversity' is a term intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything previously experienced in a particular society (see Vertovec, S. [2007] 'Super-diversity and its implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29(6): 1024-54.

<sup>15</sup> Commission on Integration and Cohesion *Our Shared Future*, (2007) pg 33

<sup>16</sup> Runnymede Trust Who cares about the white working class? 2009 <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/WhoCaresAboutTheWhiteWorkingClass-2009.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Garner, S. White working class neighbourhood: Common themes and policy suggestions 2011, Joseph Rowntree Foundation <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/white-working-class-neighbourhoods>



forms of extremism.

Over this period there was the development of some excellent local organisations and practice in understanding and working with inter – group and community tensions including tackling prejudice and hate crime, cross communities dialogue, developing empathy and understanding between different ethnic groups and communities, and developing community's agency and voice. Through the Cohesion agenda housing, public sector agencies and local authorities also developed programmes of work at a local area level. Many of these organisations and agencies contributed to this report, and examples of the kind of work these projects are undertaking in order to develop good community relations are referenced throughout.

As a result cohesion became a new lens for looking at communities with its focus on intra-group relationships, inter-group relationships, and the relationship between people and place. And there is some evidence to suggest that work on cohesion over the last ten years had some impact - the latest surveys demonstrate an increase in people's positive feelings about other communities and their neighbourhoods<sup>18</sup>.

## Through the cohesion lens:



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<sup>18</sup> Citizenship surveys 2001 – 2010 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/research/citizenshipsurvey/>

## The current context

The global financial crisis of 2008-9 and the resultant rapid reconfiguring of global and national economies, together with the change in political leadership in the UK, means that in 2012 the context has shifted radically.

The Big Society and Localism agendas with their emphasis on volunteering, social action, and the participation and empowerment of local communities, have invested responsibility in civil society at a time when we are seeing the sharpest cuts to public sector spending in over a generation<sup>19</sup>. In addition the Government paper *Creating the Conditions for Integration*, February 2012 indicates that in this area of work an increasingly localized response<sup>20</sup> is preferred.

Currently 2.5 million people are unemployed, and many more are in extremely poorly paid work, the 'working poor'. Over 1 million of those unemployed are young people in the 16 – 24 year age bracket<sup>21</sup>.

The summer riots of 2011 were the worst in a generation, and many were shocked by the consumerist nature of the looting. However, below the media images a more complex picture emerges. The Riots Panel report indicates that some of the rioters were motivated by a sense of injustice over how the young are being treated, with a lack of job opportunities and inequality being cited by many as part of the reason they took part<sup>22</sup>. 70% of those arrested come from the 30% poorest communities in the UK<sup>23</sup>.

Involvement of the public in democracy and decision-making is currently low, as is the trust that many have in government, and other authorities such as Police <sup>24,25</sup>. This feeds directly into some of the divisive narratives we explore in this report. Many decry voter apathy, but one research participant observed immediately after a local election, '*you can see complacency slipping into the dominant political groups already...it's unbelievable but they*

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localismplainenglishguide>

<sup>20</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government. *Creating the Conditions for Integration 2012* <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/2092103.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Office for National Statistics

<sup>22</sup> LSE / Guardian research *Reading the Riots* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots>

<sup>23</sup> LSE / Guardian research *Reading the Riots* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots>

<sup>24</sup> Bromley, C. (2004) *Is Britain facing a crisis of democracy?* Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends.

<sup>25</sup> Riots, Communities and Victims Panel (2012) *After the Riots*.

*are already complacent ... which is a key cause of political disinterest around here ...because they are complacent they fail to act on what local people feel needs their attention'.*

As resources continue to shrink the pressure on individuals and communities is likely to intensify, and the specialist skills and knowledge of good relations approaches in supporting local areas to build resilience, and manage change and diversity, may become increasingly relevant. A small number of research participants commented on current policy, and mainly expressed concerns - *'localism shifts resource away from deprived areas, but the drivers of poor cohesion have not changed, the underlying causes are not changing, so I am concerned this will mean more conflict'.*

These are some of the current issues that are acting globally, nationally and locally on us, and influencing people's perceptions and concerns, and driving controversial issues to the fore.

## 2 What are the controversial issues and why are they difficult to talk about?

**This section examines:**

- **the controversial issues and why talking is difficult**
- **divisive narratives and the concerns and feelings that drive them**
- **the triggers that can result in a rise in community tensions.**
- **the role of the media in promoting divisive narrative**
- **some of the underlying factors that impact on the divisive narratives**

### **What are the characteristics of controversial issues and why are they difficult to talk about?**

From our research with practitioners we identified the following:

- Concerns were expressed that if a controversial issue or narrative was surfaced through dialogue it may exacerbate community tensions rather than diffuse them, particularly if there were a lot of strong feelings and opinions expressed.
- Residents, workers, dialogue facilitators don't always feel confident or competent to deal with what comes up, i.e. it is too hot for them. Interviewees expressed this as people not knowing what to say, not being used to strong feelings and emotions, finding it hard to hear difference, feeling that values are being transgressed particularly when hearing narratives of prejudice or expressions of extremism.
- Surfacing issues can uncover an underbelly of deeply felt feelings and narratives that can seem difficult to address within the limitations of resources and time.
- The structural inequalities feeding the controversial issues, e.g. educational attainment, poverty, unemployment, lack of social housing cannot solely be addressed through dialogue.
- A lack of support from local community leaders, whose interventions can sometimes be unhelpful.

From our practice over 10 years as Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers we would also add:

- Community facing staff are often the ones who are most likely to end up in a controversial conversation with the public because of their role. However, they often feel least informed and have the least confidence and skills to have these conversations. They are often from the community they serve and may have sympathy with some of the narratives.

What is a controversial or hot topic in one local area may not be hot in another. Our research participants identified a wide range of issues as being controversial. We suggest that these issues become controversial or 'hot' when there is a confluence between, local narratives<sup>26</sup>, local demographic and socio-economic conditions, a specific trigger or triggers and underlying structural inequalities.

## Divisive Narratives

In different local areas different narratives predominate, often dependant on the local demographic and socio-economic factors. By narrative we mean a way of seeing or framing an issue. It may be partly based in fact, and will certainly have deep and strongly held feelings associated with it, but it will only be one side of a many sided story<sup>27</sup>. It is a way of seeing the world that includes some elements and leaves others out.

For example practitioners told us about:

- lack of trust between population and Police, Housing Authorities, Local authorities (*narratives of distrust and powerlessness*)
- the impact of oppression on minority communities in areas where the majority community is white and settled (*narratives of prejudice and distrust*)
- an influx of overseas students into a town leading to one of the fastest rising BME populations in the country (*narratives of belonging*)
- the impact of generations of unemployment on a local community with lack of hope (*narratives of powerlessness and resentment*)
- intra-ethnic tensions between communities where one is settled and one is new (*narratives of prejudice and belonging*)

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<sup>26</sup> The organisation Who Is Your Neighbour first coined the term 'divisive narratives' which we have developed further here.

<sup>27</sup> Holmes, T., Blackmore, E., Hawkins, R., & Wakeford T. The Common Cause Handbook, PIRC. 2011 for a full explanation of 'frames' and how they relate to our explanation of narratives. [www.pirc.info](http://www.pirc.info)

Some narratives are directly and obviously divisive in that they pit groups against each other, others more generally erode individual and community resilience and hope. Our experience, and that of our research participants, is that dialogue enables these narratives to be expressed and explored. Through this process of sharing and reflection with others a more complex and nuanced understanding of both the underlying issues and other perspectives emerges. From our interviews and focus groups with practitioners, and our own practice, we have identified the following narratives as being particularly problematic for community relations. Many of the narratives are inter-related.

### **Narratives of prejudice and entrenched stereotyping towards ‘others’**

By entrenched we mean that the prejudice or stereotyping cannot be shifted easily. The ‘other’ can be, for example, young people, older people, single mothers, lesbian and gay people, black people, muslims, white people, but may also be determined by geography (e.g.. people from a different estate or area). Narratives about immigration also belong in this category - concern about immigration is consistently high. In a recent opinion poll commissioned by the Migration Observatory 69% of respondents want immigration reduced<sup>28</sup>. However, they point out there is a great deal of confusion about who people are talking about when they refer to ‘immigrants’.

### **Narratives of unfairness and entitlement**

These narratives promote the idea that ‘others’ are getting better treatment or more resources purely on grounds of their identity or circumstances (e.g. single mothers), and not because they ‘deserve’ it. The narrative about unfairness may be different from actual unfairness, (though it is difficult to define as unfairness is essentially subjective). However, the distinguishing feature of unfairness as a narrative is that it narrowly compares one group’s treatment to another group’s treatment, rather than exploring unfairness from the bigger picture of structural inequalities. It is relatively easy to use this type of narrative to raise tensions in local communities, as for example experienced in areas where EDL operates<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Migration Observatory: Thinking behind the numbers: Understanding public opinion on immigration in Britain 2011 [www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk)

<sup>29</sup> From private interview with individual close to EDL

## **Narratives of belonging**

This narrative relates strongly to place. It can be expressed as a response to demographic change, 'this place is not like it used to be', or 'no one speaks English around here anymore'. Other versions of this narrative relates to the idea of territory and who has more right to it – for example young people caught up in postcode conflict, or where certain geographical neighbourhoods are perceived as belonging to one particular ethnic group.

## **Narratives of distrust and powerlessness**

Distrust is expressed in local institutions, organisations and services, such as the council, the social landlord, the police. Distrust may also be expressed towards those who are 'other' or different, and towards national leaders and politicians. The UK has one of the lowest levels of trust in institutions in Europe<sup>30</sup> and this is particularly marked amongst young people. Research has demonstrated that if people feel able to influence local decisions, for example who manages the local social housing resources they are more likely to feel a sense of social cohesion with their neighbours and locality<sup>31</sup> and this in turn relates to individual and community agency and voice.

## **Narratives of resentment and despair**

Research by Hoggett et al<sup>32</sup> and Garner<sup>33</sup> with white working class communities identify deep feelings of abandonment, betrayal and despair, which can manifest as a narrative of resentment towards other groups. There is a sense of being 'forgotten' and 'abandoned'. Resentment can be felt towards other groups who are perceived as getting more, and towards local services and politicians. Communities where there are strongly held narratives of resentment may be particularly ripe for exploitation by the far right.

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<sup>30</sup> New Economics Foundation: National Accounts of Well-being Report 2007 <http://www.nationalaccountsofwellbeing.org/>

<sup>31</sup> Laurence, A. and Heath, J. (2008) Predictors of community cohesion: Multi level modelling of the 2005 Citizenship survey, London: Department for Communities and Local Government

<sup>32</sup> 'Hoggett et al, 2008, for Bristol City Council. Class, Race and Conflict in Hillfields. Centre for Psycho-social Studies, UWE and Community Resolve; and Beedell et al, 2010, for Bristol City Council. Impact of the recession and barriers to community cohesion in six Bristol wards. Community Resolve and Centre for Psycho-Social Studies, UWE

<sup>33</sup> Garner, S. White working class neighbours: common themes and policy suggestions. 2011. Joseph Rowntree Foundation <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/working-class-neighbourhoods-summary.pdf>

## A word of caution on ‘narratives’

These narratives may be underpinned by real and genuine grievances, and strongly held feelings and opinions. The importance of listening to community members’ feelings and concerns cannot be overemphasised and we explore this in more detail in Chapter 6.

It is also important to point out that socio-economic factors may be indicators that these problematic narratives may be present in communities but they are not necessarily predictors. There are many remarkable ordinary people who are the holders of hope for their communities and who are actively engaged in local improvement initiatives, and many remarkable groups and communities who despite facing considerable challenges continue to work for the good of all. As one of our interviewees remarked, *‘I genuinely think people want to thrive and live well side by side but myths, misinformation, fear of the Other; the internalisation of oppression gets in the way’*.

## Local demographic and socio-economic factors

Research<sup>34</sup> carried out for the Commission on Integration and Cohesion showed a correlation between certain community characteristics and good community cohesion. Deprivation, high levels of crime and Anti – Social Behaviour, the level of facilities and the quality of public services in an area all play a part in reducing cohesion; as do the numbers of people on benefits, past industrial decline, and the overall quality of the area as a place to live. Diversity was found to be a positive predictor of cohesion except in places where there had been a sudden influx of new arrivals. There are exceptions to these – some very deprived, but very diverse areas are very cohesive.

These different factors influence which narratives may be more likely to predominate. For example, one of the areas we worked in, a majority white area, had experienced significant industrial decline over recent years, and had high levels of unemployment. Narratives of powerlessness and distrust predominated, as did narratives of prejudice against anyone who wasn’t from the local area, with particular focus on immigrants and BME communities.

It may also be important to pay attention to areas which do not have the community level characteristics of concern but where there is support for extremist ideologies, for example a

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<sup>34</sup> DCLG Cohesion Delivery Framework 2010: Our understanding of community cohesion. p16



mainly white fairly affluent area which regularly buses large numbers to attend extremist rallies elsewhere in the country.

## Specific triggers

When one or more of these narratives are present then it may not take much to trigger an escalation in tension. These narratives can be the fuel<sup>35</sup> - if there is a specific trigger or spark, community tensions may heighten.

From our research and our own practice we give some examples of specific triggers below. However, almost any incident or event can act as a trigger and triggers can occur locally, nationally or internationally.

- a sudden increase in new arrivals in an area with a settled community
- plans for a new gypsy and traveller site
- death in police custody
- resident parking issues because of mosque attendance on a Friday
- an incident of hate crime
- housing being allocated to asylum seekers on a local estate
- a single mum getting a council flat
- an EDL stall at the local market
- new arrival communities not appearing willing to integrate
- a local community leader making prejudicial comments against a particular community
- an escalation in an international conflict situation which directly affects members of a community or group in the UK

The influence of local and national community and political leaders and how their words can influence divisive local narratives cannot be underestimated. For example Jack Straw's comment about wanting to ask Muslim women to remove their veils when they attended his local MP's surgery influenced narratives of prejudice and stereotyping of Muslims. Whilst his intention might have been to surface a hot topic for discussion it also triggered a spate of 'veil-pulling' and assaults on Muslim women in some local areas.

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<sup>35</sup> Fine, N., & Macbeth, F. with Broadwood, J., Haslam, C., & Pitcher, N. *Playing with Fire – training for those working with young people in conflict* 2nd edition 2011 Leap Confronting Conflict / Jessica Kingsley Publishers. See the Fire and Conflict model pg 15

National and international incidents and events can also act as triggers for local community tensions, for example, the London bombings in 2005 escalated distrust and fear of Muslims and helped by sections of the media influenced narratives of prejudice and stereotyping of Muslim communities.

Government agendas, if not sensitively handled can feed into these narratives and provoke a rise in tensions. For example the coalition government's focus on alleged fraud and over-claiming of disability benefits has influenced some local narratives of fairness and entitlement. The disability charity Scope cite the government's handling of these issues as being implicated in a 41% increase in hate crime reported by people with disabilities<sup>36</sup>.

## The role of the media

The role of the media can be critical in promoting divisive narratives. In Deborah Tannen's book 'The Argument Culture'<sup>37</sup> she describes how the media has become increasingly influenced by the desire for conflict and adversity.

'the argument culture, .....rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done: The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate. The best way to cover news is to find people who express the most extreme views and present them as "both sides". The best way to begin an essay is to attack someone. The best way to show you're really thoughtful is to criticize.'

The danger of the argument culture is that it locks us into an oversimplification of issues. Many of the issues that are facing local communities require careful, thoughtful examination and discussion. However with some parts of the media focused on duality and adversity there is little opportunity for explorations of complexity. Many of the practitioners we interviewed talked about the role of local and national media in stoking up community tensions, and the prevalence of misleading and inaccurate reporting.

## The Underlying Factors

Underneath these problematic narratives are some very real drivers.

### Structural inequality

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/feb/05/benefit-cuts-fuelling-abuse-disabled-people>

<sup>37</sup> Tannen, D. The Argument Culture, 1998, Ballantine Books

*'A fundamental good relations issue for us is poverty'*

Extensive research by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett has demonstrated that the quality of social relations is worse in less equal societies. In their book 'The Spirit Level'<sup>38</sup> they argue that inequality divides people by increasing the social distances between them and widening differences in living standards and lifestyles. The resulting increase in residential segregation of the rich and the poor reduces opportunities for interaction and engagement. The research also demonstrates that high levels of trust are more likely where there are low levels of inequality. Recent research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that the gap between the rich and the poor has risen more in the UK than in any other developed country since 1975<sup>39</sup>. Research by Laurence and Heath demonstrates that there is a strong correlation between socio-economic deprivation at a local level and poor community cohesion<sup>40</sup>. Therefore work which only focuses on dialogue and meaningful interaction and does not acknowledge and address structural issues of inequality runs the risk of putting poor community relations down to certain groups or communities being somehow dysfunctional rather than being a consequence of structural issues of poverty, power, and prejudice.

### **Living in an increasingly interconnected and complex world**

'The world is getting more crowded. Depending on the circumstances, conversations across boundaries can be delightful or just vexing. What they mainly are, though, is inevitable'.

*Kwame Anthony Appiah, philosopher and cultural theorist*

The impact of an increasingly global economy, the opening up of internal EU borders, poverty and international wars, means that populations are on the move like never before. British people settle abroad, with common destinations being Australia, New Zealand, France and Spain. Previous patterns of immigration into the UK through the 1950s - 70s have in the main been from new commonwealth countries. More recently the pattern has changed so that cities are experiencing a level of diversity that has never been experienced before.

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<sup>38</sup> Wilkinson, R & Pickett K The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone, Penguin 2010

<sup>39</sup> OECD: Divided we stand - why inequality keeps rising October 2011 [http://www.oecd.org/document/51/0,3746,en\\_2649\\_33933\\_49147827\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/51/0,3746,en_2649_33933_49147827_1_1_1_1,00.html)

<sup>40</sup> Laurence, A. and Heath, J. (2008) Predictors of community cohesion: Multi level modelling of the 2005 Citizenship survey, London: Department for Communities and Local Government

'Superdiversity'<sup>41</sup> describes the complexity of diversity that is now a feature of many major UK cities, for example there are over 300 languages spoken in London schools.

In addition notions of identity have become more complex and identity definitions based on one characteristic do not fully capture people's sense of who they are<sup>42</sup>. This is particularly true of the children and grandchildren of immigrants whose sense of who they are may include their town, being British, their faith, ethnicity, football team they support, etc. Interestingly the identity group that is growing fastest in the UK are those who are of dual or multiple heritage - the children of inter-ethnic relationships.

24 hour rolling news broadcasts, together with technological advances so that a picture can be taken and shared globally in minutes, means that people are aware of international events and their impact on local issues and narratives like never before. Furthermore, as we saw last year across the Middle East, and closer to home, the use of handheld devices means that people are able to mobilise crowds of protestors, or rioters, at a moments notice.

As our economies become increasingly interdependent multi-national corporations and banks and international markets, play a crucial role in local and national economies, heavily influencing employment, and wealth. In fact as we have seen from the banking crisis that began in 2008 they are more influential than democratically elected national governments in determining economic outcomes.

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<sup>41</sup> Super-diversity' is- a term intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything previously experienced in a particular society (see Vertovec, S. [2007] 'Super-diversity and its implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29(6): 1024-54). 'Over the past twenty years globally more people have moved from more places to more places; wholly new and increasingly complex social formations have ensued, marked by dynamic interplays of variables, including: country of origin (comprising a variety of possible subset traits such as ethnicity, language[s], religious tradition, regional and local identities, cultural values and practices), migration channel (often related to highly gendered flows, specific social networks and particular labour market niches), and legal status (including myriad categories determining a hierarchy of entitlements and restrictions). These variables co-condition integration outcomes along with factors surrounding migrants' human capital (particularly educational background), access to employment (which may or may not be in immigrants' hands), locality (related especially to material conditions, but also to other immigrant and ethnic minority presence), and the usually chequered responses by local authorities, services providers and local residents (which often tend to function by way of assumptions based on previous experiences with migrants and ethnic minorities)'.  
<sup>42</sup> Commission on Integration and Cohesion. *Our Shared Future*. 2007, p43

Case study:

## Community Resolve

Following street-based action research during 2010 with local young people, residents, businesses, local agencies and voluntary groups, one project set up by Community Resolve is a multi-agency initiative to work with marginalised central Bristol young men (and increasingly women) aged 16-25.

Staffed by Community Resolve mentors of similar backgrounds to those who attend, we run two open sessions in different areas of the city (traditionally rivals) to provide advice, guidance, companionship, safety, food and leads into a more positive lifestyle. We also support the reintegration of young offenders and other isolated young people back into their local communities, including those coming out of young offender institutions.

A key indicator of success is that those who attend – described as ‘unreachable’ in statutory meetings - are attending voluntarily in increasing numbers, drawn in through outreach by workers they know and trust and by word of mouth, with young men returning with their friends. Our next step is underway: a ‘third space’ for focussed learning and an informal local employment network to provide a way out of trouble.

# 3 Who is having the difficult conversations, intentionally or not?

**This section explores the range of models for delivery of good relations interventions.**

For those of us who work in community facing roles, conversations about controversial issues are part and parcel of our interaction with communities. However, our interviews with 34 organisations in England suggests an important distinction that divides us into two categories of workers. The distinction we suggest is one of intentionality.

## **Intentional / Specialist organisations**

There are a group of organisations who intentionally work to engage communities and groups in conversations about controversial issues, with the aim of building more engaged, resilient and cohesive neighbourhoods. They may term their work good relations work, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, dialogue work, good neighbours work, community cohesion, intercultural dialogue, interfaith work. Although their approaches, underpinning philosophies and starting points may vary, their intention, roughly generalized, is to do this through understanding the needs and positions of different communities and groups, and work with them to foster understanding and empathy across difference. They may have a particular focus on young people, or have a particular vehicle for their work, such as the arts, but their overall intention is to contribute towards the improvement of community relations.

Within this category we would also include academics and researchers who have been thinking and writing about the issues. Although they may not be engaged in delivery their work can be profoundly influential of practice for those who are interested in their findings.

Many of the practitioner organisations in this category are based in London, particularly those with national or international reach. Others are in areas with histories of unrest and community tensions, with a significant number along the M62 corridor.

## Generalist organisations

In the second category there is a much wider group of individuals, organisations and agencies who are committed to delivering services in local areas, or undertaking social action. In this group are public service agencies such as the police, local authorities, schools and colleges, as well as youth services, community development organisations, social enterprises, voluntary organisations, criminal justice and community safety organisations. Under the Equalities Act all public service agencies are required to 'foster community relations'<sup>43</sup>. However, this is not necessarily their area of specialism or main concern, and their work may impact upon community relations in both positive and negative ways.

Many of these organisations may now be reacting to concerns about service cuts, with workers more frequently being part of conversations about who benefits and who loses out. There are many who are skilled in facilitating difficult conversations, and who have skills and techniques for developing these conversations when they arise as part of their everyday work. However, there are also examples where the controversial issues are ignored, avoided, or poorly handled because of a lack of confidence and knowledge about how to respond. As we move into the era of Localism, with its emphasis on power sharing and co-production with local communities<sup>44</sup>, there is an even greater need for community facing staff to have skills in these conversations. As suggested at a recent cohesion seminar workers will have to listen to views they may feel uncomfortable with, and will need conflict management skills in order to respond well<sup>45</sup>.

## Delivery Models

There are a number of different models of delivery for dialogue and good relations work. Each has its benefits and costs, and we explore these briefly below.

### Model 1)

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<sup>43</sup> Section 12 of the summary The Equalities Act 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/notes/division/2/1>

<sup>44</sup> Localism Act 2011 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted/data.htm>

<sup>45</sup> Seminar - Beyond Cohesion: Reconnecting the ties that bind local communities. Public Policy Exchange.

Many of the **specialist organisations** in England are locally rooted. They are characterised by:

- Being embedded in the local area they serve, knowledgeable about their communities, well known with significant reputations
- Having a strong philosophy, skills base, and developed methodology behind their approach
- Trickle down an understanding of dialogue work into the communities around them, cascading the skills and confidence of residents and local community to engage in discussions, as participants, volunteers, and employees
- An emphasis on locally developed solutions

Controversy is a part of this group's training and practice. They have become skilled at facilitating '*dangerous conversations in safe spaces*'<sup>46</sup>. Their training in conflict transformation processes means that they expect difficult conversations to emerge when people's words are fuelled by strong feelings, beliefs and values. They have become skilled at listening and developing people's ability to listen to what might be unpalatable or difficult. They have experience that these difficult conversations, held well, can result in greater understanding of another's viewpoint, and possibly a shared common direction forward.

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<sup>46</sup> This description was coined by Leap Confronting Conflict in its work with young people around identity, prejudice and conflict



Case study:  
Aik Saath  
means  
'Together as  
One' in  
Hindi,  
Punjabi and  
Urdu

These words embody the ethos of our charity. Our belief is that young people should lead our work. We believe in working with people from all communities, faiths and backgrounds to encourage community cohesion through peer-led education.

Our training programmes are designed and delivered by highly-skilled volunteers aged between 12 and 25. Their work can be banded into two categories: (i) responding to conflict and (ii) preventing violent conflict.

(i) We have mediated between a wide variety of conflicting groups, for example, young people from Somali and Jamaican backgrounds; Polish and English backgrounds; and Sikh and Muslims backgrounds. The group has also addressed intra-group tensions, for example within the Afghan community and the Sikh faith.

(ii) In contrast, our team also delivers training to promote community cohesion before conflicts arise. This can involve strengthening young people's sense of belonging in our town, ensuring that groups understand and accept our differences and similarities

### Model 2)

Other **specialist organisations that are not locally rooted**, but are working across England and/or internationally. They are characterised by:

- Having a strong philosophy, skill base, and developed methodology behind their approach
- Being able to draw on national and international experience
- Delivering on a project based approach, on a time limited basis in a particular locality
- Developing the skills and confidence of residents and local community to engage in controversial conversations as participants
- If funds permit projects also develop the skills and agency of participants, in order to leave a legacy of resilience and competence that will allow future tensions to be well managed.

These organisations have many of the same skills, experiences and approaches as those in model 1 with the difference being that they do not necessarily have the close relationships with local areas, relying instead on locally trusted host organisations to act as links into communities.

### **Model 3)**

Some areas have developed **local networks of residents and frontline staff with a specific interest in and skills in community relations**

These groups are characterised by:

- Focusing on generalist workers and residents, so that they can facilitate activities to improve community relations
- An anchor point who is often, but not always, someone within the local authority with particular responsibility or skill. However, as the network becomes more self sustaining they move from driving the network to serving it.
- Participation in specific training in conflict analysis, facilitation and dialogue skills
- Well networked in to other initiatives locally.

Viewed as a resource by local communities and public service agencies who therefore have an investment in supporting the network. This is a model Talk for a Change have developed with partners in a number of areas. The development of the skills and confidence of community facing staff is crucial to success. They often come from and live in the local area. What they say is more likely to be trusted<sup>47</sup> than what is said by other employees, and investment in their skills and confidence to engage in these conversations well is of huge benefit. It may be the most sustainable approach for the coming years of austerity, where we envisage a greater need for conflict transformation and community cohesion skills, but less money to resource agencies providing them. Specialist organisations can support organisations in this group.

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<sup>47</sup> Mean, M. & Spires, P. State of Trust: How to build better relationships between councils and the public. 2008. Demos.

## Case study:

# Champions on Sea

[southendcommunityinaction.posterous.com](http://southendcommunityinaction.posterous.com) is a small reflection of some exciting developments in Southend-on-Sea over the past two years.

The website, which seeks to strengthen local collaboration & communication, as well as providing an ongoing resource to equip people to support positive community, originates from the Community Conversations & Champions network, set up with the help of Talk for a Change. The network meets regularly and emerged from a year long programme, where 130 local people were trained in practical ways to stimulate positive community relations.

The Local Authority's Enterprise & Community Team who commissioned the training in 2010 continues to support this growing and open network which benefits from a diverse range of volunteers and professionals. Increasingly, network members are collaborating to generate and join with new and existing initiatives that support positive community relations.

In the past year, network members have supported a local school in creatively responding to emerging cultural tensions, as well as joining to organise a successful cultural celebration. Additionally, the development of themed myth-busting fact sheets are effectively equipping local people to tackle unhelpful myths and stereotypes.

Case study:

## Newcastle Conflict Resolution

Newcastle Conflict Resolution Network was formally launched in 2008. Run by a management committee of Quakers and others, it creates momentum and focus in Newcastle for people to bring concerns about destructive conflict and to share knowledge and skills; activities have included:

- work with local residents and front-line workers – the ‘grassroots’ – as well as the ‘grasstops’ of decision-makers and decision-shapers in the City.
- celebration of positive things local people are doing to reduce conflict, for example in Engage for Change handling conflict training in Walker
- support for those working on conflicts through training, consultation, facilitation and resources for nonviolent conflict resolution, through Transforming Conflict Northern Experience 2011
- the creation of ‘safe spaces’ for people to talk frankly and honestly in order to increase understanding of the causes of conflict and what can be done to resolve it.

### Model 4)

**Public sector agencies** such as Local authorities, community safety partnerships etc. who have developed ‘in-house’ capacity for good relations work.

Many public sector bodies are mainstreaming their good relations activities, or maintaining a very small number of workers with specific responsibility. With good understanding of the activities required to monitor and intervene in emerging tensions this can work. This is particularly true of areas where complex patterns of diversity and demography mean that public sector bodies such as the local authorities have developed skills and capacities for understanding and working with cohesion and good relations issues.

Case study:

## Community Cohesion in Leicester

Community cohesion in Leicester is about all our communities living well together. Our vision is for all our communities to live in harmony and peace with each other, enjoying the prosperity the city affords and, in their own way, contributing to the welfare and wellbeing of everyone.

Community cohesion in Leicester includes our traditional white communities as well as our ethnic minority communities, and also includes a much wider concern for our young people, for the role of women in our city, as well as for those who are disabled and those who have a different sexual orientation.

Through the Leicester Partnership, the Community Cohesion Project Team found that race and ethnicity were not over-riding issues of concern but what troubled people most were those common issues around housing, schools, transport and poverty.

The leadership of the city was very aware that community cohesion does not happen by chance. It has to be actively worked at and actively encouraged. People from all communities need to be given the opportunity to get to know each other better and so learn to live well together.

However the Council is never complacent about cohesion and realises that community relationships can never be taken for granted.

### Comment on Sustainability

There is no one model that is best, of course, simply a range of different approaches with benefits and challenges. Some areas facing consistently high tensions and conflicts have a specialist locally rooted organisation in place (model 1); areas without a specialist organisation may bring in specialists to run dialogues as an 'impartial outsider' (model 2). They may also invest in a network of community facing workers trained in conflict transformation work (model 3). Our specialist research participants commented that building

relationship, trust and reputation locally is a key activity for their organisations which uses enormous resource. Anecdotal evidence from research participants suggests that one benefit of the network approach may be the reach of dialogue skills into mainstream posts as well as into communities. In our experience this model needs a dialogue or cohesion champion of sufficient standing to lead the work.

Whilst it is clear from practitioner interviews that local solutions and approaches are not directly transferable to other areas, there is much that the specialists and some of the generalists have in common. They share a belief in the power of dialogue, the importance of building community voice and agency, and the benefits of increasing understanding between communities and groups of different backgrounds. Although there are subtle differences in how they define and describe their work they have broadly similar methodologies, skills and values, and we felt that much could be gained from sharing and discussing practice and approaches.

# 4 Can talking about controversial issues improve community relations?

**This section reviews the literature and practitioner experience of raising controversial issues in dialogue, and concludes that the impact on community relations is beneficial. However there is a risk of making relationships worse if proper processes are not followed.**

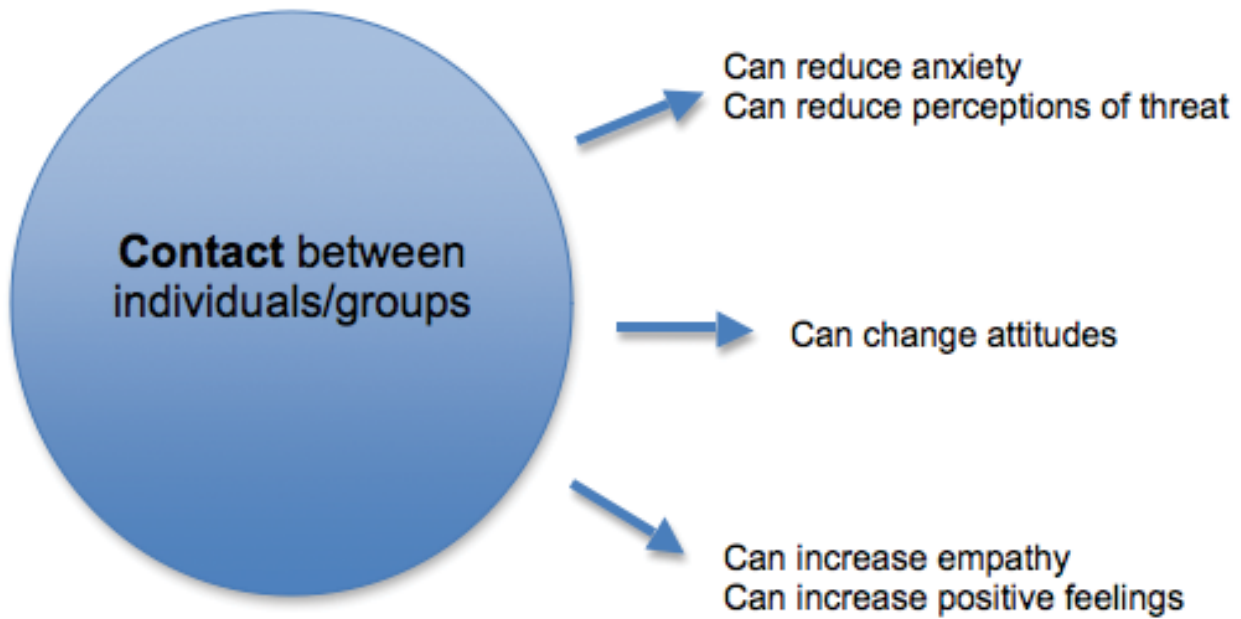
As you might expect there is no simple answer to this question. Our experience, interviews and focus groups with experienced dialogue facilitators provide anecdotal evidence that well facilitated dialogue about controversial issues can improve community relations. In the literature there is not yet specific and clear evidence - certain conditions and actions are proven to improve community relations but can discussing controversial issues be included as one of them? We explore the relevant research here, and hope to stimulate further discussion of this important topic.

## The benefits of talking

Talking about controversial issues creates contact between people in communities, and through the contact itself positives can be achieved. Contact theory<sup>48</sup> has been well researched, and consistently shows that contact between 'groups' can reduce the anxiety and prejudice held by one group about another, can be a protective factor against rising community tension and can increase empathy and understanding.

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<sup>48</sup> M. Hewstone, 2009 . Living apart, Living together? The Role of Intergroup Contact in Social Integration. Proceedings of the British Academy, 2009, 162, 243-300.



Of course the specifics of this are complex. Certain types of contact and certain conditions increase the benefit of contact and reduce risks - the most recent publications show that friendship between members of different groups is a particularly powerful change factor, and regular contact helps to shift attitudes positively<sup>49</sup>.

New research describes two other types of contact that help community relations. The first is indirect contact<sup>50</sup> - which is either knowing about or observing a fellow ingroup member having a friend from an outgroup. This can have a positive influence where direct contact is undesirable or unlikely.

The second new finding has shown that contact has the potential 'to reduce not only prejudice toward groups the individual has been in contact with, but also prejudice toward other, even unrelated, groups'<sup>51</sup>.

So for example, if I reduce my prejudicial view of older people through contact with them I may also have less prejudice towards other discriminated against groups such Muslim people or gay and lesbian people. This is known as 'secondary transfer effect'<sup>52</sup>.

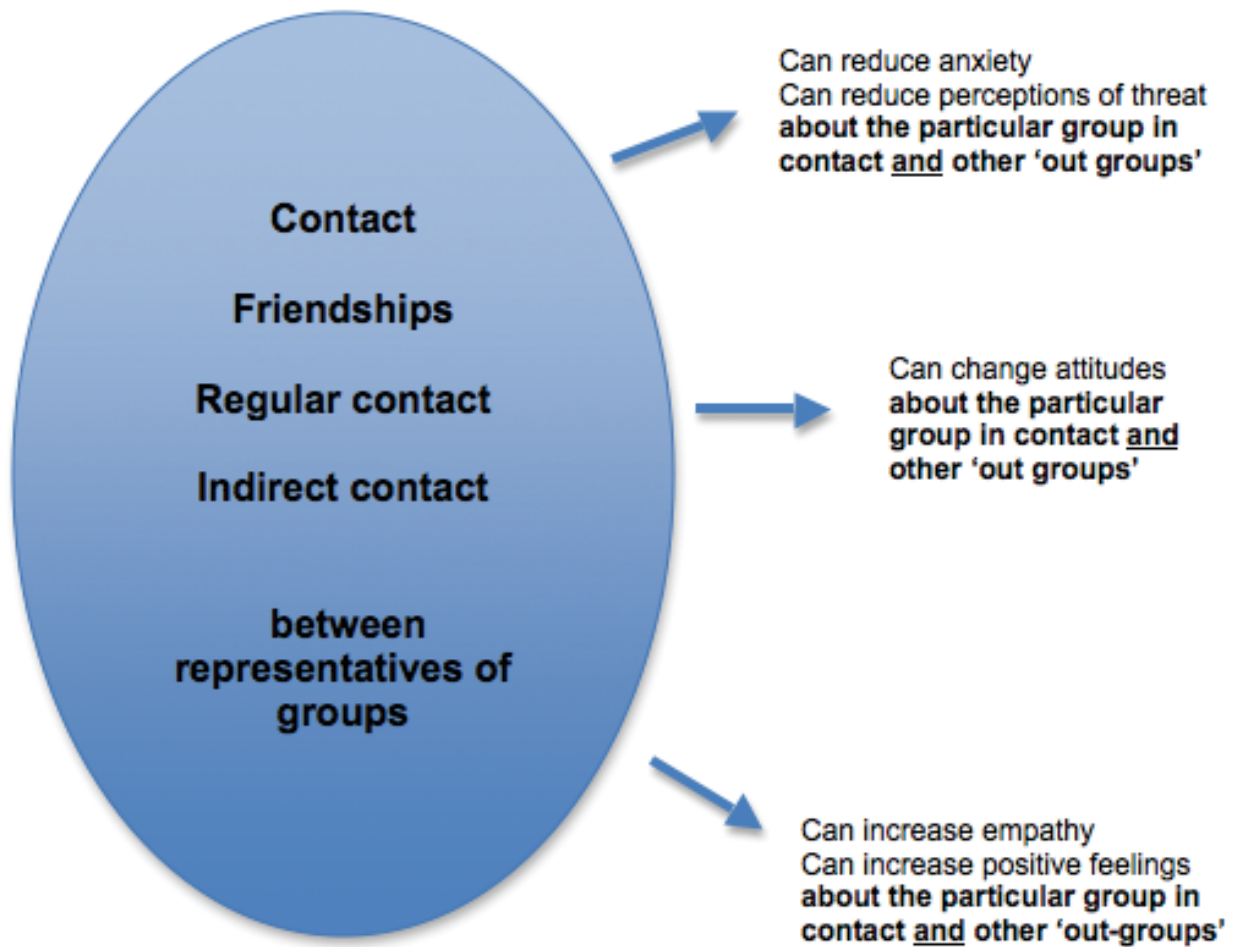
<sup>49</sup> K Schmid, M Hewstone, B Kuppe, A Zick, U Wagner, Secondary Transfer effects of intergroup contact: a cross national comparison in Europe. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 2012/75:28

<sup>50</sup> K Schmid, M Hewstone, B Kuppe, A Zick, U Wagner, Secondary Transfer effects of intergroup contact: a cross national comparison in Europe. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 2012/75:28

<sup>51</sup> K Schmid, M Hewstone, B Kuppe, A Zick, U Wagner, Secondary Transfer effects of intergroup contact: a cross national comparison in Europe. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 2012/75:28

<sup>52</sup> K Schmid, M Hewstone, B Kuppe, A Zick, U Wagner, Secondary Transfer effects of intergroup contact: a cross national comparison in Europe. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 2012/75:28





Case study:

## Conflict and Change in Newham

Conflict and Change is a grassroots peacebuilding organisation working in Newham, one of the poorest and most diverse boroughs of London. We work side by side with local volunteers to build bridges and address conflict in the community through mediation, training adults, children and young people, community development and community conversations.

Our community conversations work provides a forum for difficult or 'hot' topics to be discussed in a safe way, deepening understanding between otherwise disparate or conflicting groups. We do this through setting a clear structure and valuing all experiences equally, and through listening deeply to hear the emotions and needs which underlie positions.

One example of a community conversation which enabled difficult issues to come to the fore was our facilitation of a neighbourhood meeting about anti social behaviour. In small groups each person shared their experiences in turn. Unlike officers or councillors, the facilitators were able to let the negativity be expressed, show empathy and draw out the themes. This was followed by turning the focus forward, mixing up people and asking for their ideas – both among neighbours and for the authorities. The energy changed entirely. At the end the majority of people agreed to organise a street party and this took place on Big Lunch Day 2011.

This comment was received from a participant:

'I have great pleasure in letting you know that the big lunch is in fact taking shape and ready to occur on June 5th. I feel that the session held by Conflict and Change was the fundamental starting block for the community being brought together. There is an increasing band of people who turn up regularly and slowly and steadily we are bringing the community together. It was only yesterday that someone said hello to me in the street - you suggested small changes we can make and it is evident.'

## The benefits of informal talking

For many people contact with people of different beliefs or identities may be informal, such as a quick chat between neighbours in diverse neighbourhoods<sup>53</sup>. Controversial issues may well not be discussed in these conversations, the conversations may be very light and safe; sometimes these contacts may be more negative, such as arguments about dogs or noise. The benefits of the positive routine informal conversations can be as great or greater than the benefits of more formal planned dialogues or contact activities in breaking down barriers and building cohesion<sup>54</sup>. If these informal contacts around school gates and in shops are civil this adds benefit as part of the 'social glue' that holds communities together<sup>55</sup>, building resilience in communities for future tougher challenges. The Carnegie Commission on Civil Society<sup>56</sup> consider such talking, particularly about the big issues as 'a vibrant element of a vibrant civil society'.

## Being positive about disagreement and difference

There is a broad spectrum of views on whether or not being in disagreement is a good thing. This will no doubt influence worker's approach to raising controversial issues. Some of our research participants see disagreement as positive - social change may emerge from the challenge and debate. Others fear disagreement as an indication of a damaged community, and the beginnings of unmanageable unrest.

Many leaders are particularly concerned with the risk, and practitioners are well aware of the risk of deterioration of relationships. One experienced dialogue facilitator commented '*The perception of risk in discussing hot topics is greater than the actual risk in my experience*'.

It may be reassuring for the fearful that the literature suggests benefit in being 'pro-disagreement', although this new piece of jargon may be a little misleading. We understand it to mean not avoiding disagreement, and encouraging and allowing well managed

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<sup>53</sup> Laurence, A. and Heath, J. (2008) Predictors of community cohesion: Multi level modelling of the 2005 Citizenship survey, London: Department for Communities and Local Government

<sup>54</sup> H. Beider (2011) Community cohesion: the views of white working-class communities, neighbourhood, cohesion and change. JRF. p8 <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/working-class-views-neighbourhood>

<sup>55</sup> P. Griffith, W Norman, C. O'Sullivan, R. Ali (2011) Charm Offensive. Cultivating civility in 21st Century Britain. Young Foundation

<sup>56</sup> Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland. Making Good Society: Final report of the commission. Carnegie UK Trust. March 2010, pg 142 <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/getattachment/425ea7ae-58fd-4751-a52e-2e78362c97f4/Making-Good-Society.aspx>

disagreement to happen, in order to seek exploration and understanding of the issues that are controversial.

Philip Neisser is passionately pro-conversation and ‘pro-disagreement’<sup>57</sup>; he believes that ‘truly dangerous levels of hate have sometimes been generated where there was a prolonged absence of talk across the relevant borders, when group-think or dehumanization went unchecked by actual encounters with the Other’.<sup>58</sup>

Professor Paul Rogers supports the surfacing of tough issues rather than ‘attempting to keep the lid on insecurity (liddism)’. He is also characteristically clear about the need to deal with the underlying issues; ‘liddism, without addressing the core reasons for dissent, will not work’<sup>59</sup>. As outlined in Chapter Two the divisive narratives need to be discussed, but the underlying issues need concerted attention as well.

Some academics and practitioners have started talking about disagreement success, which would involve ‘*both difference and diversity being explored*’ and working to ‘*build relationships in spite of difference*’. In their view this results in increased social cohesion and social capital<sup>60</sup>. This view is supported by Hickman et al, ‘it is necessary to enable and support expressions of both difference and unity in local areas’<sup>61</sup>. Overall our focus groups were pro-disagreement, pro raising the tough issues. It is our experience from practice that many practitioners think they need to focus on similarities more than differences, but that the work of real tough discussion requires us to focus on both.

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<sup>57</sup> P.T. Neisser (2006) Political Polarization as disagreement failure. *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 2.(1) 2006

<sup>58</sup> P.T. Neisser (2006) Political Polarization as disagreement failure. *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 2.(1) 2006

<sup>59</sup> Paul Rogers, *Losing Control: Global Security in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 10

<sup>60</sup> Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland. *Making Good Society: Final report of the commission*. Carnegie UK Trust. March 2010, pg 142 <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/getattachment/425ea7ae-58fd-4751-a52e-2e78362c97f4/Making-Good-Society.aspx>

<sup>61</sup> Hickman, M., Crowley, H. & Mai, N. *Immigration and social cohesion in the UK 2008* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, pg 180

Case study:

## Centre for Good Relations

The Centre for Good Relations is an independent not for profit company based in North West England. The core work of the organisation is civic mediation. This includes facilitation and dialogue, working through issues of contention and dispute, and addressing social conflicts and tensions.

The Centre for Good Relations (CfGR) was invited to bring a Good Relations approach to help tackle the growing tensions in Boston, Lincolnshire.

When a local group decided to demonstrate to raise their concerns regarding the impact of the numbers of Eastern European Migrant Workers on the town, the relationships and structures that had been established enabled conversations to be had between Civic Leaders and the protesters. The protesters agreed to postpone their demonstration to allow a process of dialogue about these issues to take place in order to find ways of addressing them. This included a Civic Workshop bringing together the majority of the key stakeholders. The workshop was the first time a group like this had come together in the town to discuss these issues.

### Protective Factors

Some local authorities fully understand the link between the contact theories and the benefits of getting people together to talk about controversial issues; they have embedded difficult debates through long term development of networks of skilled practitioners in communities with many controversial issues to tackle.

Our hypothesis is that this approach provides a level of protection to those areas and an increase in civil engagement; for example in one area with a robust network residents were able to alert Local Authority staff to the potential for disorder after a breakdown of trust between the police and young people in the area. Co-ordinated interventions took place very swiftly, and disorder was averted.

We would like to explore further if our hypothesis is correct. It seems certain that discussing controversial issues between populations and providers, such as the public and the police,

can alleviate hostile attitudes if the quality of contact is high<sup>62</sup>. This may be of interest to authorities struggling with trust and engagement, as contact can improve understanding of the different perspectives on an issue, and help people to see the others involved as individuals. It is also of relevance that *greater trust and lower interest in violence* is noted in young far right activists who engage in offline as well as online debate, in comparison to online debate only<sup>63</sup>.

## The risks and cautions

The key reason given for avoiding talking about controversial issues is a belief that it will make things worse. If you think of the last time you were talking and the person or people you were talking to were not listening, you will have a strong sense of one of the dangers of talking, one of the reasons people don't want to get into it - that all the effort of preparing to speak and speaking, perhaps in a hostile environment, is wasted because you are not listened to. Worse, you may feel let down, belittled or angry as a result. If you held negative stereotypical views of the listener beforehand these will no doubt now be heightened. There are far too many anecdotes from local areas describing just this process, particularly when those talking have been encouraged to do so by consultation or participation exercises, or as part of a self seeking political campaign.

Despite the academic and anecdotal evidence, some of which has been available for many years, talking about tough issues can be unpopular with some local politicians and some senior officials, some community facing workers and community members. As research participants observed *'this work is risky and our particular local authority are very risk averse'*, *'the power brokers are afraid to surface the issue, they fear its going to cost money'*. It may also be a cultural shift to engage in dialogue about tough issues -as one focus group member said *'why talk if you can resolve things another way?'*

Some community members may avoid talk if they have previous experience of engaging with people who offer to action change, but actually lack the capacity to make it happen, and they disappoint by failing to deliver.

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<sup>62</sup> Viki, G. T., Culmer, M. J., Eller, A., & Abrams, D. (2006). Race and willingness to cooperate with the police: The roles of quality of contact, attitudes towards the behaviour and subjective norms. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45, 285–302.

<sup>63</sup> Bartlett, J., Birdwell, J. & Littler, M. The new face of digital populism. 2011. Demos.

Another reason not to talk about controversial issues may be the absence of skill, or the fear of the absence of skill, of those in the discussion to hold the space. The dangers of poorly managed inter-group contact are well described<sup>64</sup>. At worst poorly managed contact does damage, as negative views are reinforced, so facilitator skill is important. Participant fears and perceptions of threat must also be assessed, and if they are too high then bonding work, or contact just between leaders, is required before any bridging takes place. In some very settled communities it may be of great concern that certain characters, certain individuals, may hold power over a discussion or dialogue and hold power over dissenting individuals for many years to come.

Some people in our field are also cautious about dialogue, for example Harris is a little wary of the benefits of dialogue alone, seeing it as a more contentious approach than contact through arts or sports activities<sup>65</sup>. One participant also raised the crucial issue of what happens after a dialogue, as facilitators are not able to contain the risk beyond the facilitated process, and individuals may become vulnerable in the community as a result of their participation. A research participant described a recent experience when a conversation in an educational setting was continued on Facebook after the facilitated conversation had ended, with difficult consequences for individuals and groups involved. Safeguards for individuals who feel themselves to be at risk will need clear consideration by the individuals and facilitators.

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<sup>64</sup> Broadwood, J. and Sugden, N. Building Cohesive Communities. 2009. DCLG, pg 6-7

<sup>65</sup> M. Harris (with P. Young) (2009) 'Developing Community and Social Cohesion through Grassroots Bridge-Building: An Exploration' Policy and Politics 37,4 517-534. <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/pap/2009/00000037/00000004/art00005?crawler=true>

# 5 How to address controversial issues - *learning to sit in the fire*

**This section describes how practitioners know what's a hot topic in their area, how practitioners prepare for dialogue, the skills used by practitioners, with particular reference to working with strong feelings.**

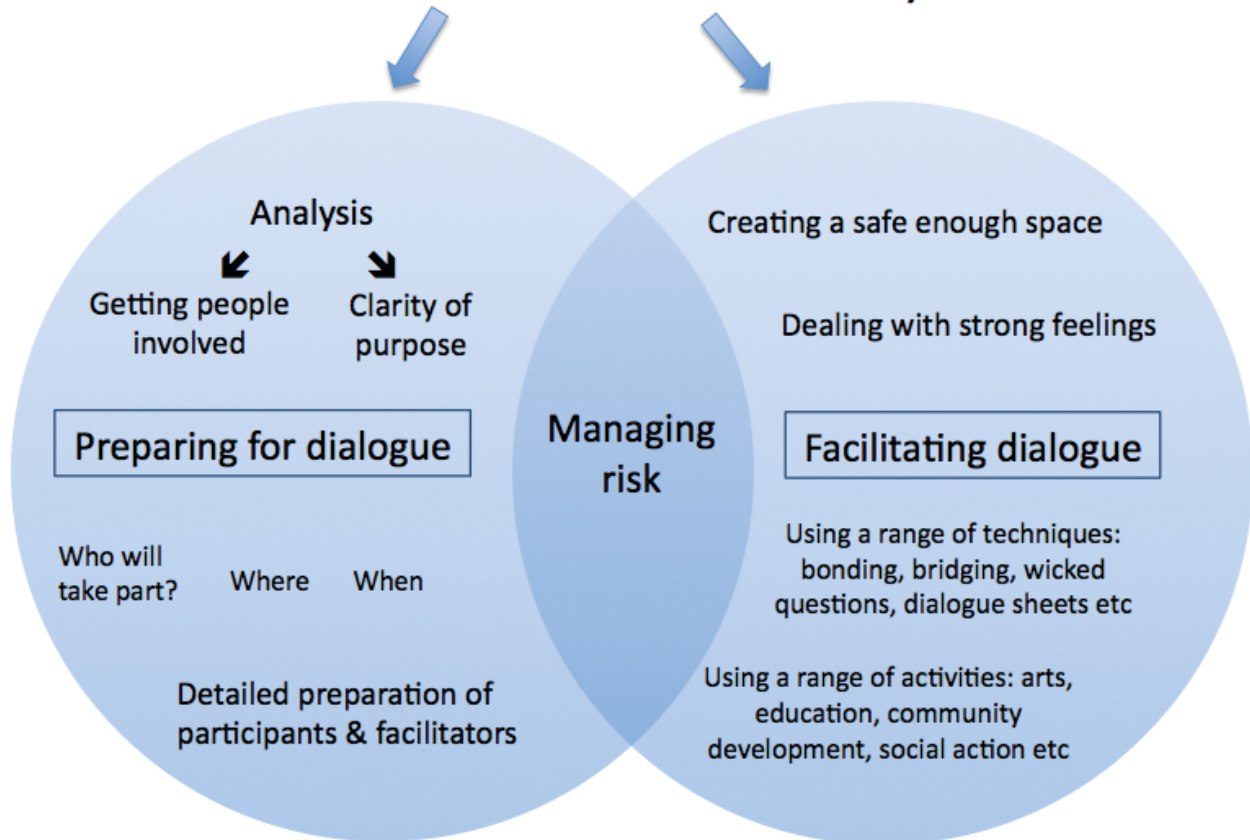
A practitioner who has many years of experience facilitating difficult conversations in her local area, describes the process as '*learning to sit in the fire*'. This section contains thoughts from our experience, and the reflections of generic and specialist practitioners made during their practice and during the course of our research.

The danger of writing a section called How to address controversial issues is that it creates a mystique around this activity and may make it seem difficult and unachievable to all except 'experts'. Both the skills of facilitating dialogue on hot or controversial topics and the principles and values practitioners bring to their work may need careful and gradual development, but are not impossible to learn. We hope to encourage and inspire you rather than be daunting.

This is not a practical guide to dialogue, nor is it a one size fits all approach. The evidence from our research and our own experience indicates strongly that different approaches are required according to the controversial issue, the local divisive narratives and the local context. What we offer here are some reflections gathered from our interviews, focus groups, reading and past experience. We have grouped them roughly in the order you might encounter them if you are planning to embark on facilitating a community conversation. We look forward to discussing these further over coming months.



## Become aware of what is controversial in your area



### How do you know what's hot or controversial?

Knowing your local area, and being aware of how local, national, or international triggers might play out against local narratives, is vital. Research participants have a range of ways of staying informed about local controversial issues. For locally embedded organisations in a particular locality, the ongoing relationships they make and sustain with local people enables them to listen to diverse voices and to have a sense of what is hot and whether tensions are escalating. Crime and Disorder partnerships may use hate crime and community tensions monitoring data, they may monitor local and social media, and use local intelligence gathered through networks of community facing workers.

Community facing public sector workers can face particular challenges in identifying the emergence of hot topics as they are often caught up with different priorities – their authorities may wish to engage a local neighbourhood in a discussion about a particular issue, whereas residents may wish to talk about something else of a more burning nature to them. This is one of the ways that public sector workers can end up in discussions about contentious issues feeling unprepared and lacking in the appropriate skills.

The community networks we described in Chapter 3 are often excellent at picking up early signs of tension and acting swiftly to defuse a situation, and to inform wider networks and where necessary public sector agencies, such as the police or housing. What is essential is to work with a broad range of local partners and listen to a diverse range of local voices. As we have discussed in Chapter 2, what is hot in one area, will not be hot elsewhere, and what is hot for one group within a community may not be for others. A nuanced understanding and analysis of local conditions will be important for dialogue success.

Some organisations we spoke to are proactive in holding conversations when they judge that local or national events either may trigger divisive narratives or provide an opportunity for building good relations; one organisation tries *'to give people the opportunity to talk about things they might not talk about unless prompted, and we offer topic based discussions, for example on nationalism and the Royal Wedding'*.

## Preparing for Dialogue

### Getting people involved

Engaging local people in a dialogue process arose as a critical issue for some of our research participants. This is not only about getting people to a venue at a certain time for an agreed purpose, but also about recruiting people for change. The majority of practitioners had struggled at some point with engagement; *'its difficult because trust in local institutions has got worse', 'how do you have a conversation when the people you want to join the conversation are so disenfranchised'*. However the overall message about engagement was positive; the hurdles are surmountable. One organisation reported investing extremely significant proportions of time to recruitment on each dialogue project, which had increased success. Many organisations undertake considerable *'outreach work to bring people in', 'if we approach from the basis that we are all after some basic needs and face the same sort of challenges it is straightforward to get people on board. Engaging people therefore isn't an issue. If you crack the route in people will always have something to share'*. What gave our research participants hope was that even in the most extreme situations of disagreement where there are significant power disparities there will always be *'people trying to build bridges'*<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> D. Francis (2010) Dialogue Society Discussion. <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/discussion-forums/330-making-dialogue-effective-panel-discussion-3-effectiveness-in-dialogue-for-conflict-transformation.html>

## Case study: Talk for a Change

Talk for a Change was asked to facilitate a dialogue between community members and service providers in an area of a Northern town facing significant environmental difficulties, rubbish, dog fouling, needles, bottles etc. There was also a breakdown of trust between local residents and service providers after years when residents needs remained unmet for a range of reasons.

By talking to service providers and residents individually, and describing the safety features we build into our dialogue work, we began with a small but useful first meeting, around 6 service providers and 10 residents, all known as “the usual suspects”. Strong feelings were expressed but everyone was heard. As a result of word of mouth feedback on this initial meeting, the next meeting a week later had an attendance of over 50 residents, and a subsequent meeting more still.

The word in the local area was that everyone had a fair chance to speak and be listened to, and that everyone had equal power in the process. It was this that had brought more residents through the doors. It was clear that some service providers needed more support in the future to be comfortable with this power shift.

### Analysis

Analysis of issues, individuals and context is a crucial part of preparation. One experienced practitioner outlined the process they follow, which will be familiar to practitioners familiar with conflict transformation philosophies.

*‘We use our context analysis tool to enable people to deepen their understanding of the issues, the actors (those directly involved as well as those who exert influences), the relationships between the actors, the issues that bring them together or separate them, and the power structures in that particular context’.*

There are a range of such tools available, and we have found that they give participants a new framework with which to consider the hot topic, and a new shared and less personal perception of the issues at hand. This can help avoid the poor practice witnessed by some of

our research participants of *'people running to hot topics without any real thought, and not asking questions first before rushing in'*. An analysis tool we have found useful and have adapted for use with communities is The Responding To Conflict mapping tool, which you can find in *'Working With Conflict'*<sup>67</sup>.

## Purpose

*'Allow the clarity of purpose to define the process'*<sup>68</sup>.

Our research participants identified a range of purposes for planned dialogue work on hot topics. They fell into the broad categories of work with single identity communities (or bonding work) and work with diverse groups (bridging work):

- Bonding work – to develop greater understanding of other identity groups, to let go of blame and judgement in order to prepare to create relationship.
- Bridging work - to create contact between different groups, to increase understanding and awareness of each other, to create meaningful interaction, to create the space for social action

Our research participants mainly undertook dialogue work with groups of residents, however, some, including Talk for a Change, also facilitated dialogue between public service providers and residents. One project<sup>69</sup> sees their purpose as *'a means of developing positive community relationships and act as a conversational bridge between groups in the community and decision makers'*.

Despite the presence of strongly held views and disagreements between residents our research participants did not see their purpose in facilitating dialogue as resolving these disagreements necessarily. This may be because they are wise to the fact that *'it is possible to solve a conflict and not change much'*<sup>70</sup>. Overall their purpose was to promote improved community relations through opening up hearts and minds to enquiry and curiosity and the development of greater understanding between people, a desire *'to transform those things*

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<sup>67</sup> Fisher, S. etc al (2000) Working with Conflict . Zed Books

<sup>68</sup> D. Francis (2010) Dialogue Society Discussion. <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/discussion-forums/330-making-dialogue-effective-panel-discussion-3-effectiveness-in-dialogue-for-conflict-transformation.html>

<sup>69</sup> Tiffany, G. Community Philosophy: A project report. 2009. Joseph Rowntree Foundation <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4DHnLQRu81YN2VjODY5MTU0NWYyMC00NmNhLWFIMGMtZWlZOGZMjg0YWWEw/edit>

<sup>70</sup> Lederach, J.P. Introduction to *'Berghoff Handbook for Conflict Transformation'* 2011 <http://www.berghoff-handbook.net/>

that damage and tear apart human relationships into those that protect and build healthy communities'.<sup>71</sup>

In order to build healthy communities, we may need to give up our desire for peace and harmony in the short term. This passage quoted in 'Making Good Society' is from Northern Ireland practitioners who have extensive experience of difficult dialogue:

'the work I have been involved in was almost destroyed by the notion that its primary purpose was harmony, that good relations is primarily about harmony. Progress ...looked not like instant harmony but involved finding the places where the hard issues can be addressed. There was no way for us to talk about a future we could all share without talking about the police, without talking about paramilitaries, without talking about the distribution of goods and power, and every time we did it we risked harmony. Progress is measured by seeing more people talking about these things in the right places and in an atmosphere that we all might survive and be brought along by the answers'<sup>72</sup>.

Perhaps our deeper purpose is to help people to open their hearts and minds to hearing different and oppositional ideas and beliefs, and to see things from another's point of view. We aim to allow a little air and light into a discussion, to be prepared for confusion and strong feelings, and to give time for people to find their way towards change.

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<sup>71</sup> Lederach, J.P. Introduction to 'Berghoff Handbook for Conflict Transformation' 2011 <http://www.berghoff-handbook.net/>

<sup>72</sup> Duncan Morrow quote in Making Good Society: Final report of the commission on the future of civil society in the UK and Ireland March 2010, pg 140 <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/getattachment/425ea7ae-58fd-4751-a52e-2e78362c97f4/Making-Good-Society.aspx>

Case study:

## Leap Confronting Conflict

This programme is about developing the awareness and skills in young people so they are equipped to be proactive at reducing prejudice based on identity.

Language about prejudice can be difficult. Coming from a desire to promote equality, the 'zero tolerance' approach to prejudice has also made many people fearful of talking about prejudice in case they are viewed as 'racist'. We wanted to ensure that honest conversations could happen without the fear of stigmatisation. In practice, we work with groups to develop ground rules which ensure a certain degree of respect for each other whilst giving permission for young people to speak honestly, without the fear of being labelled. Nothing is unspeakable, but the speaker is asked to take responsibility for their views personally, which can then be discussed and challenged.

This approach has enabled us to open conversations with young people about the racist violence in their communities, perceptions of 'whiteness' and many other contentious issues, giving them the opportunity to be heard, challenged and reflect on their own beliefs and prejudices.

### Who takes part?

The majority of research participants use facilitators, with only one saying that it wasn't always a given '*we do not always go for a facilitated process, just an agreed process - its most useful to contain the anger and it means not having people around who could be seen to be interfering*'. The purpose of the facilitator when used is outlined below.

Some discussion in our focus groups centred on whether or not the facilitator needed to be well known to those attending or not, with different views expressed, '*if you build too much of a relationship and too much trust then you are reluctant to disagree, and reluctant to go to the hot topic cos people like each other by now*'. For some, the idea of a dynamic outsider as facilitator is therefore preferable to the use of a well known local.

The presence of a trusted individual within the process, whether their role is to facilitate or to support the presence of an outside facilitator, is crucial. 50% of our research participants commented that building relationship and reputation locally is a key activity for their organisation which takes enormous time. To be trusted requires organisations to undertake *'long term investment and intervention in a locality'*. One participant commented that as a specialist organisation *'it has been possible to have a real impact on the city because so many people know us'*, this visibility has enabled the organisation to propose that dialogue could take place in a timely way, and to participate in their facilitation.

One of our local authority research participants commented *'Strong relationships continue to be fostered with partners - this is key and ensures a well rounded approach to tackling challenges'*.

Research participants involved in bridging work aimed to follow JP Lederach's model of involving *'non like- minded and non like-situated'* in each dialogue process, so that one can begin the complex process of building new webs of contact in a community<sup>73</sup>.

Our research participants suggested that in bridging work it is ideal to have *'enough representative voices from each position in attendance at a dialogue'*. This is of course an aspiration that may not always be achievable. If there is a position or positions about the issues being discussed that no-one represents it is possible for the facilitator to include the absent voices by asking "what might the ...people think or say"?

### **Preparing participants and facilitators**

*'In dialogue you will hear uncomfortable stuff'*.

Facilitators in our research talked of the need to ready themselves for dialogue, both in terms of the acquisition of specific skills training (facilitation, communication, groupwork, conflict transformation) and mental and emotional preparation. Most also did preparatory work with participants, discussing what they might expect from the process, and how they might behave. Previously identified<sup>74</sup> key attitudes for dialogue, which may seem simple but can in practice be challenging, are willingness to take part, to listen, to change, and to be open to

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<sup>73</sup> Lederach, J.P. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding* 2005 Oxford University Press

<sup>74</sup> Kelly, U. with Cumming, L. (2010) *Civil Society, Supporting Dialogue and Deliberation*. Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland. p8 Published on behalf of the Commission by the Carnegie UK Trust.

listening through disagreement, entering through confusion and loss of control, both of which are some of the most difficult parts of dialogue.

Talk for a Change and many research participants believe it is very important to prepare people for disagreement and for listening - *'its good to achieve a mindset change in a group before we open up the difficult topics for discussions'*. Experience indicates this is particularly important in dialogue where there is a considerable power imbalance in the room, as *'those who hold power do not easily relinquish it and may be unready to talk about change and concede power'*<sup>75</sup>.

Much of our work and that of research participants has been with people who feel anger, fear, and powerlessness about issues which they perceive they have no control over – whether that is their housing, their immediate neighbourhood, or national / international events. Our research and reading have reinforced our views that being in dialogue when strong feelings are present is essentially about being able to create a space where these complex feelings and issues can be expressed, explored and usefully contained, without recourse to quick fixes or sticking plaster solutions. In order to arrive at creative transformative ways forward we need to be able to work our way through the complexity - *'I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity'*.

*Oliver Wendell Holmes*

## **Risk**

In a focus group a participant commented *'We see it as "minded risk taking" this hot topics stuff, as there is always a real danger that people might hate each other more'*. This is a real possibility, and is something all practitioners will have experienced at one time or another. It is perhaps the major reason many workers and leader avoid addressing hot topics in any purposeful way at all. The risk of people embedding previously held stereotypes and hating each other more is mitigated by careful preparation and careful application of the contact hypothesis. Talk for a Change, and many other specialists, assess risks before undertaking either bonding or bridging work, and after each interaction with community groups, so that

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<sup>75</sup> D. Francis (2001) *Lessons from Kosovo/a: Alternatives to War. The Peace Testimony in the Twenty-first Century*. Quaker Peace and Social Justice.



emerging risks can be appropriately managed. Often talking alone to individuals who are perceived as leaders can help assess and reduce risk<sup>76</sup>.

### **Where?**

Whilst finding a place to talk that is perceived to be accessible and impartial to everyone is standard practice in dialogue work and might sound relatively easy, in some very geographically fractured communities, this is very difficult, and symbolic of the challenges present. But neutral ground, or a place of equality<sup>77</sup> is of the utmost importance. Some of the specialist organisations we interviewed are based in buildings that are perceived as neutral and can therefore offer this resource to the process.

It is very useful to discuss with participants where they would feel safe, and the details of that safety. A research participant talked about *'manufacturing a place for people to go to that's safe, before we raise the risk that is addressing the contentious issue'*. In one dialogue Talk for a Change facilitated we put significant preparation into transport plans, parking places, and access corridors and lifts to the rooms we would use, just to enable people to feel safe arriving at the venue.

### **When?**

The importance of timing in tackling a controversial issue became apparent in focus groups; many participants referred to getting the timing of the intervention right. The Stages of conflict diagram<sup>78</sup> is a useful tool to use in assessing how a contentious issue is being played out in a community, the aim being to talk sooner rather than later. One Local Authority is currently working on dialogue with its residents so early in the process that very little resentment has built up, and controversy is kept nearly exclusively to the content of the issue itself.

The majority of our work has been in areas where contentious issues have been allowed to fester and become more entrenched before interventions are proposed. Or worse, controversial issues have only been raised publicly in the lead up to elections, benefiting

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<sup>76</sup> J Broadwood, N Sugden (2008) Community Cohesion Impact Assessment and Community Conflict Prevention Tool. <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/communitycohesiontool.pdf>

<sup>77</sup> D. Francis (2010) Dialogue Society Discussion. <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/discussion-forums/330-making-dialogue-effective-panel-discussion-3-effectiveness-in-dialogue-for-conflict-transformation.html>

<sup>78</sup> Fisher, S., Ludin, J., Williams, S., Abdi, D.I., Smith, R. & Williams, S. Working with Conflict – skills and strategies for action Responding to Conflict. Zed Books, pg19.

politicians but damaging community relations. This is not usually the case in areas with either a specialist organisation or a generic network alert to community tensions.

In the good relations field we also talk about ripeness, the moment when something has shifted for an individual or group that makes it the right time to talk. What we hope is that we are with people when they are still curious about each other and interested in learning and discovery.<sup>79</sup> A research participant commented *'You can hear the signs when conflict is building, the language changes. In peace people are curious about the other. In conflict they stop being curious, they **know** about the other'*<sup>80</sup>.

A final note of interest from a research participant *'What is challenging is building up the awareness for funders and stakeholders that you only get that magic chance for change and transformation if you come up to the problem right - in the right way, at the right time'*.

### Case study:

## Foundation for Peace

The Foundation provides educational programmes to people affected by conflict, including victims and survivors of terrorism; former combatants; ex-servicemen and women and children and young people affected by race and faith base conflict. The work we do is designed to help people to move forward with their lives in a positive way.

We explore identity, prejudice and discrimination and the causes, effects and transformation of conflict. We promote dialogue, discussion and debate in schools and communities.

Our work in a school saw 72 young people trained as peer leaders to tackle prejudice and discrimination in their school and community. In an area being targeted by the EDL the programme built resilience and capacity in the young people to challenge attitudes and behaviour that were breeding division and hostility. The 72 participants educate their peers and hold challenging conversations in the classroom. Staff were also trained to build their confidence in holding difficult conversations. This has led to the implementation of in-school programmes to tackle racism and prejudice.

<sup>79</sup> Who is Your Neighbour? (2012) A Review of the ways in which divisive narratives impact on prejudice in South Yorkshire and how they can effectively be challenged.

<sup>80</sup> Peter O'Reilly, Mediation Northern Ireland in Seminar Newcastle upon Tyne 2011

## Facilitation Skills and Knowledge

Members of the Newcastle Fairness Commission in discussions about our findings commented on how important it is for facilitators to say to others 'I've done this often, it feels tricky, but there is a way through this'. These comments indicate the importance of bringing in experienced facilitators to a dialogue, to boost the confidence of all taking part, and to hold the hope.

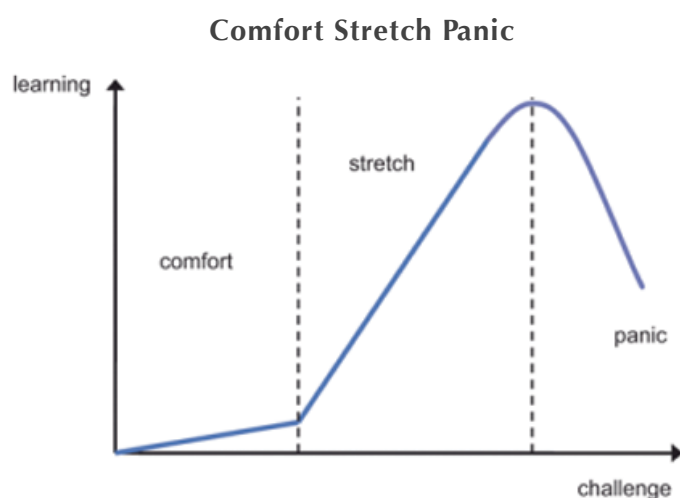
We recognise that facilitating dialogue on controversial issues is a challenge requiring skills, imagination, creativity and bravery, and we outline some of the skills below.

### Safety

The first skill is in creating a sense of safety for participants, as a core principle in our work is not to make anything worse through our interventions.

Research participants discussed how we create a safe enough atmosphere for people to be present and to discuss controversial issues. There was strong disagreement in our focus groups about the use of 'ground rules' in dialogue work; one organisation stated *'we don't use ground rules as its too structured, but we use a dialogue structure to provide the safety, so we give everyone a turn, reflect back what we've heard, people have equal time'*. Other organisations use *'a shared agreement, in it we say try not to feel too personally offended, it will be upsetting but we hope you will enter not seeking to be offended'*.

Talk for a Change try to ensure we do not pretend to participants or to ourselves that the space will feel safe all the time - it is in the nature of discussing controversial issues that we feel stretched, and outside our comfort zone but not panicked.



As one participant said ‘we ensure people are aware of what they are signing up to, that they are told its not easy, not fluffy’. So in preparation we can inform participants that in any dialogue ‘there will be conflict and that is normal’<sup>81</sup>. We can also encourage individuals to be thoughtful about how much they say within a dialogue process, both in order to protect themselves and to enable others in the process to gradually hear new and challenging views. We consider it the facilitator’s responsibility to help individuals to do this, but also that individuals need to be able to manage their own safety, and be empowered to do so. This is primarily because in our experience there are many different perceptions of safety, and cultural, generational, gender, class and relational issues all impact on how direct and open individual participants feel able to be in the expression of their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Our experience is that facilitators can aim for both the presence of safety<sup>82</sup> and disagreement simultaneously – a step too far in either direction defeats the purpose, but getting the balance just right allows for disagreement and the expression of strong feelings, without leading to people shut down or leaving the room.

The facilitator’s attitude and demeanour can model behaviour for others; they must not be so perfect or well behaved as to shut down disagreement and debate...a little edginess is ideal, but not too much! It is the facilitator’s responsibility to ensure that differences can emerge, be listened to and discussed.

Two wise commentators are quoted in a dialogue professional’s blog – ‘People do hold grievances and if you focus on what they have in common rather than the grievance they feel disrespected and cheated that the grievance is not aired’, and ‘we need to learn to disagree skilfully. Seeking common ground only takes us so far. We need to find value in world views different from our own’<sup>83</sup>.

### **Strong feelings**

Much of our work and that of research participants has been with people who have very strong feelings about the matters being talked about, and this was the topic that caused most concern in our interviews and focus groups. It is clearly a challenge even for the most talented and experienced facilitators.

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<sup>81</sup> D. Francis (2010) Dialogue Society Discussion. <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/discussion-forums/330-making-dialogue-effective-panel-discussion-3-effectiveness-in-dialogue-for-conflict-transformation.html>

<sup>82</sup> D. Francis (2010) Dialogue Society Discussion. <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/discussion-forums/330-making-dialogue-effective-panel-discussion-3-effectiveness-in-dialogue-for-conflict-transformation.html>

<sup>83</sup> Keyes, S. What is good dialogue? 2011 <http://stethelburgas.org/what-good-dialogue>

A key question is how best to allow feelings to be surfaced in a way that is not too difficult for the individual, while allowing others to hear, to broaden their understanding, and be moved to make changes. Our research findings suggest the following are important:

- Facilitating and guiding the conversation so that feelings are uncovered, expressed, and acknowledged.
- Supporting participants to identify the needs and fears underneath their initial anger and fixed positions.
- Staying alert to the possibility of empathy and an understanding of other viewpoints.
- Being mindful of the possible repercussions of this expression of feelings, both in the immediate dialogue, and in the community beyond, and encouraging others to be mindful also.
- When appropriate, expressing our own feelings in a non-confrontational way, and not reacting to outbursts of emotion, with more emotion, but not shutting down the expression of feelings either.
- Encouraging people to keep exploring the complexity of the issues, and to remain curious. This is particularly difficult when emotions are running high, but also perhaps particularly pertinent.

When things get particularly hot, there are divergent thoughts on the best course of action - some take the Palaver Hut<sup>84</sup> approach, which aims to retain everyone in the conversation until the conversation is done, however hot it gets; other use Ury's concept of 'going to the balcony'<sup>85</sup>, i.e. leaving the room to get some space and fresh air before returning.

### **To challenge or not?**

Some behaviours can be particularly demanding when you are in a dialogue process, for example 'people being locked into their fears, defensiveness, personal issues brought into a dialogue, and 'going on about the awfulness of each other'<sup>86</sup>. The 'impact of domineering individuals' and the poor handling of disputes is noted<sup>87</sup>, with individuals 'retreating back into their certainties' as a result.

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<sup>84</sup> Palaver Hut is a building used in some West African villages used for many functions including dialogue, disagreement and decisions.

<sup>85</sup> W. Ury (1991) *Getting Past No: Negotiating with Difficult People*. Bantam Books.

<sup>86</sup> D. Francis (2010) Dialogue Society Discussion. <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/discussion-forums/330-making-dialogue-effective-panel-discussion-3-effectiveness-in-dialogue-for-conflict-transformation.html>

<sup>87</sup> Brodie, E., Hughes, T., Jochum, V., Miller, S., Ockenden, N. & Warburton, D. Pathways through Participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship? Sept 2011 <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/>

One of the particular dilemmas for facilitators is whether, or not to challenge such behaviours. This was not addressed directly by our research participants, but one approach<sup>88</sup> suggests a balance is required for staff to remain engaged with individuals but to avoid collusion with hate or vitriol. This is a balance worthy of practice and skill development. It would be unusual to find dialogue facilitators directly challenging a viewpoint in a dialogue, but rather we tend to offer alternative viewpoints and encourage listening to the other.

### Case study:

## Programme for a Peaceful City

Programme for a Peaceful City (PPC) is a knowledge exchange network based in the University of Bradford with roots in the International Centre for Participation Studies (ICPS), Peace Studies.

We have experience both in hosting public conversations about contentious issues and facilitating dialogue. In 2010 the PPC worked to try and help prevent violence when the English Defence League visited Bradford – a small contribution among many. Our learning from thinking and practice is that dialogue provides the opportunity for people to deepen their understanding of each other and can create connections that hold strong at times of stress.

The PPC also connects with people and organisations in Bradford District, from Council Officers to grassroots activists, working on issues such as community relations, power, conflict, violence, talking about contentious issues and building resilience.

### Activities and Techniques

So how can practitioners best work once the tough issues are surfaced? Our research participants employed a range of different techniques and activities for working with groups.

Some used groupwork exercises and activities rather than dialogue. This approach can reduce the intimacy and intensity of direct talk, whilst still positively increasing understanding and empathy. Our experience is that these exercises can often achieve gradual development of understandings between people, perhaps because the space and distance

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<sup>88</sup> Mullen, J. On the frontline: how frontline professionals are tackling hatred and intolerance. Community Development Foundation <http://li147-251.members.linode.com/web/guest/publication?id=413920>

allows a thoughtfulness that can effect change<sup>89</sup>. Activities and exercises can be used at any stage of a dialogue, but always with agreement of those in the room and with full explanation of the aim and purpose of the activity. Others used arts and cultural activities as a way of developing bonding and bridging work.

If activities increase contact between groups, ie are bridging activities, it is useful to learn from a very recent study<sup>90</sup> that explores the relative strength and impact of the conditions within which we create contact between groups; The findings indicate that establishing co-operation between groups is 'an important first step to successful intergroup contact'<sup>91</sup>; so for example this would involve people helping each other, having open communication and positive interpersonal interactions, getting on with a shared task of interest to everyone. This is considered the priority condition. The other three contact conditions (equal status within the contact, institutional support for the contact and working on common goals) 'reduce intergroup bias because they help to establish cooperation between groups', and therefore should continue to be a focus, but a secondary focus, for practitioners.

Questions play an important role in focusing discussion, and modelling permission to raise certain topics, creating the space for '*people who have fears they want to talk about*'. Some research participants routinely ask core questions such as 'what is it like to live around here, what do you think about the other people who live around here, what has changed over the time you've lived here'. Others find that '*communities will shape the questions for each debate*'. Wicked questions are suggested by P. Born in his book *Community Conversations*<sup>92</sup> because 'Wicked questions do not have obvious answers. Their value lies in their capacity to open up options, inquiry and surface the fundamental issues that need to be addressed'. The best wicked questions include an embedded tension, and are invitations for participants to explore an issue in all its complexity. An example of a wicked question, in an area with new housing stock being allocated, might be How could we go about welcoming new neighbours to the area, and what if the new neighbours are not from round here?

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<sup>89</sup> Fine, N., & Macbeth, F. with Broadwood, J., Haslam, C., & Pitcher, N. *Playing with Fire – training for those working with young people in conflict* 2nd edition. 2011. Leap Confronting Conflict / Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

<sup>90</sup> Koschate M Van Dick R, 2011 A multi level test of Allport's contact conditions. *Group processes and intergroup relations*. Sage <http://gpi.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/03/30/1368430211399602>

<sup>91</sup> Koschate M Van Dick R, 2011 A multi level test of Allport's contact conditions. *Group processes and intergroup relations*. Sage <http://gpi.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/03/30/1368430211399602>

<sup>92</sup> Born, P. *Community Conversations* 2008 BPS Books, Toronto, Canada pg101

Issue based dialogue is used by the Community Philosophy projects and Community Dialogue Northern Ireland. David Holloway's extremely clear and encouraging description of their use of Dialogue Leaflets is very much worth a read<sup>93</sup>. By sketching out the widest possible range of views on a particular topic prior to a community conversation Holloway aims to 'leave the reader with questions, not answers. and to 'offer an opportunity for a deeper and more rounded understanding of the complex positions that groups and individuals have and, as a consequence, they offer fresh insights into what is really important'.

## Summary

In summary our research participants have found that a facilitator can help the dialogue process considerably by '*learning to sit in the fire*', preparing themselves and others for disagreement and listening, resisting trying to find solutions, trusting the conversation to run its course, and allowing it to flow.

So many of practitioners who took part in the research spoke about the writings of JP Lederach and his impact on their practice that it seems appropriate to give him the last word: 'the moments of possibility that pave the way for constructive change processes do not emerge through the rote application of a set of techniques or strategies, but rather arise out of something that approximates an artistic process'<sup>94</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> Holloway, D A practical guide to dialogue 2004 The Community Dialogue Critical Issues Series: Volume 2, pg 8

<sup>94</sup> Lederach, J.P. The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding 2005 Oxford University Press



Case study:

## People United

People United is a creative laboratory. We explore how the arts and creativity can inspire kindness and social change

Learning from academic research (in particular the theories of altruism and pro-social behaviour) is important to our work, as is rigorous evaluation, which we conduct in association with the Centre for the Study of Group Processes at the University of Kent.

Examples of our work include a 3 year whole town project involving over 6,000 residents and growing 9 new community initiatives and a primary school programme using the arts to celebrate individual stories of kindness, generosity and altruism that increased pro-social attitudes (particularly towards out-groups) measured longitudinally and through control schools.

Case study:

## Together for Peace

Together for Peace (T4P) is a small charity with a big network. Based in Leeds, we bring together diverse people, to generate cooperative projects that tackle local or global issues.

Our work centres upon connecting people and nurturing relationships across and between people from different cultures, communities and life experience, and then helping turn visions and ideas into positive action. So – working from grassroots to government – we catalyse initiatives, broker partnerships, develop projects, processes and co-host a range of dialogue, learning and creative events. We love imaginative thinking and action, which help us see ourselves, others and our world differently.

‘In One City’, our series of films and dialogue processes about Leeds and its people, has enabled thousands of people to begin to engage with ‘the other’ in the ‘virtual room’ film can uniquely provide.

## **Snapshot of activities being undertaken by organisations interviewed as part of their good relations work:**

### **Arts:**

music, film making, contact between Jewish and Muslim residents using medium of arts

### **Belonging, bonding and bridging:**

women's groups, youth work, leadership programmes, residential programmes, mosques work both bridging and bonding, interfaith work, identity based activities

### **Co-production:**

putting front line staff at the disposal of the community, developing new relationships between state and population

### **Community development:**

community transformation work, local schools work, support to new arrivals

### **Community safety work:**

tension monitoring, taking the temperature of communities, alertness to rising issues

### **Dialogue:**

hearing people's experiences, residents questions time , specific debates ie (between bankers and others, and faith and sexuality), community conversations

### **Mediation:**

in neighbourhoods

### **Preventing violent extremism:**

funded activities (2 of 34 organisations)

### **Story telling:**

community story telling, community voices projects

### **Skills development work:**

conflict resolution skills in communities

### **Equalities work, diversity programmes**

### **Human rights work, campaigning,**

# 6 Challenges for good relations work

## **This chapter explores four current challenges for good relations work**

Our research interviews and focus groups identified four issues that people working in good relations are consistently finding challenging at present. Two of these relate to the work itself, the other two are challenges for those working in the good relations field. These are:

- Narrative dominance, media and new media
- Building hope
- Proving effectiveness through impact measurement
- Sustainability of this work

## **The challenge of narrative dominance, media and new media**

In Chapter Two we discuss the current narratives that are controversial. When we are engaged in good relations work we are often encouraging people and groups to tell their stories, share beliefs, perceptions, views, and occasionally we share and explore facts. Our research participants describe a key challenge to this process as the *'corrosive, misleading, inaccurate and incomplete reporting of local issues by local press which contribute to community tensions and suspicion'*. Many of those we interviewed consider the media, to be at the root of narratives that *'emphasise difference' and 'apportion blame'*.

Talking about controversial issues can help with the important task of developing alternative narratives. In community conversations it may sometimes feel as if we are reacting to a narrative for which the script has been written in Fleet Street, Wapping, or the regional press, rather than in the community of concern. Dialogue work can intervene in the dualistic polarity<sup>95</sup> of many of these debates, promoting the complex narratives, narratives that encompass both/and rather than either/or, narratives that explore the complexity of our global existence whilst accommodating local concerns.

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<sup>95</sup> A term used by J P Lederach in his description of one of the four disciplines of peace building 'the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on a dualistic polarity' pg 5 Lederach, J. P. The Moral Imagination (2005) Oxford University Press

This report has focused only on face to face dialogue, but it is important that we are active within all media if we wish to influence dominant divisive narratives, and promote alternative more nuanced narratives. The internet gives people the chance to be ‘tough behind a keyboard, racist vitriol is now done from desks and not in public forums – so it is covert and therefore far more difficult to address’<sup>96</sup>. After the multiple murders in Norway in July 2011 Thomas Erikson noted on the Open democracy website that the ‘sheer vitriol and aggression vented in online discussions across a broad range of media have been building on the internet for a long time’ and warns, ‘yet such hatred has come to be seen in the Norwegian public sphere as a problem only after the recent terrorist attacks’.

A key challenge for practitioners of good relations is how to move practice effectively into the online worlds, ‘Online dialogue and deliberation have significant potential if well set up’<sup>97</sup>. A very brief look at how to bridge difference online<sup>98</sup>, is able to offer negative and positive examples. There is clearly a great deal to do to further develop good relations work online.

## The challenge of building hope

This research project was originally called Hope and Hot Potatoes, as we had identified the lack of hope in many communities as a significant factor in fuelling the feelings about controversial issues.

When given the opportunity to discuss hope, research participants were very easily able to identify people who are the holders of hope in communities, even communities that are facing long term and considerable disadvantage; for example ‘*people who are prepared to be a bit visible and engage often hold the hope, people who are optimistic who want to do something about problems, people with hope can be motivated by deep values about what they want to change*’. One research participant described her vision of hope very simply as ‘*a better world for my kids and neighbourhood*’. However research participants also had difficulties with the concept of hope and less positive aspects emerged, such as ‘*only those*

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<sup>96</sup> Eriksen, T., The Net of Hatred: After Utoya Sept 2011 Open Democracy Website <http://www.opendemocracy.net/thomas-hylland-eriksen/net-of-hatred-after-utøya>

<sup>97</sup> Kelly, U. with Cumming, L. Civil Society, Supporting Dialogue and Deliberation March 2010. Carnegie Trust, pg 17

<sup>98</sup> Scearce, D. Connected Citizens: The Power, Peril and Potential of Networks. 2011. Knight Foundation & Monitor Institute. [www.connectedcitizens.net](http://www.connectedcitizens.net)

*holding power and resources have hope', 'it's pie in the sky if there's no action, alongside hope is unrealistic expectations', 'it's disempowering to put your hope in one person'.*

We were interested that the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel focussed so clearly on hope in its final report on the Riots of Summer 2011<sup>99</sup>, suggesting there is a need to build a 'climate of hope' in affected communities, and particularly amongst young people.

## The challenge of proving effectiveness through impact measurement

*'Dialogue work is the softest intervention but the hardest to evidence'*

How do we know that this work works? Our research participants indicated wide variation in current impact measurement practice. A small percentage were very sceptical about the whole impact measurement process due to concern about models, cost, time and proportionality. The vast majority considered it *'important to be transparent and clear and enable trust through this process however rickety the evaluation models'*. It is apparent that the models for evaluation in our field need much more development. Practitioners are doing their best to struggle with the considerable challenges of good relations impact measurement, and some practitioners report improvement over recent years in multi-agency collaboration and debate with funders on the matter. Research participants identified a need for a culture shift within our field towards more relevant, rigorous and enthusiastic measures of our impact and achievements.

In addition research participants identified some challenges to impact measurement which are particular to good relations work:

- Impact measurement of good relations work requires both community level and individual level elements. Community level indicators are particularly under-developed.
- Much of the work is an iterative process, the activity or dialogue evolves in response to the interests and concerns of the community members attending – *'we may want to be in a different place at the end of the process to the place we imagine at the start, in order to create real change, so evaluation systems need to reflect this'*.

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<sup>99</sup> Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012 <http://riotspanel.independent.gov.uk/news/riots-communities-and-victims-panel-publishes-final-report/>

- some good relations work is extremely confidential and of necessity hidden from public view – which poses a real challenge to impact measurement *‘this work was under the radar and you can’t evaluate something that never took place!’*
- the difficulties of measuring *‘indirect impact and the prevention of something’* – how do you demonstrate that your work has prevented community conflict escalating?
- It is hard to disaggregate the different factors that impact on a reduction in community tensions in a local area – it may be the result of a programme of community conversations, and/also a school intervention, a new policing policy, an individual moving from the area. Our practitioners suggest it is *‘easier and more accurate to talk of significant contributory factors’*.
- Measuring shifts in attitudes and behaviours
- Measuring impact over time can be *‘resource intensive and often beyond the capabilities of a small organisation’*.

## The challenge of sustainability of this work

The current economic situation is taking its toll on the good relations field, alongside many other civil and public sector service organisations. Nearly 60% of the specialist organisations we spoke to were experiencing reductions in funding (as of January 2012), and the impact of cuts on public sector agencies is well documented elsewhere.

Staff within organisations are spending considerable time raising funds; whereas in previous years this time may have been spent in building social capital and transforming difficult situations in communities. Competition for funds makes collaboration within the sector demanding.

A number of research participants indicated their concern about skills development and quality control, and identified a need for skills development both within and beyond the sector. Many of the specialist organisations who participated in this research provide training in dialogue work, and Talk for a Change agree with their caution against making specialist training *‘exclusive and inaccessible’*.

Whilst we would not want to make a special case for this work at the expense of other service areas we are concerned that we risk losing expertise, knowledge and experience in this field, at a time when there is a sharp increase in pressure on individuals and communities, and divisive narratives are increasing in dominance.

## 7 Looking forward

Research carried out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that based on current evidence and policy initiatives absolute poverty in the UK is likely to rise over the next couple of years, and median income is expected to fall by the largest rate in the last 35 years.<sup>100</sup>

There has been much public debate about whether or not the current economic situation will affect the north of the country disproportionately compared to the south, poorer people disproportionately compared to the very rich, women disproportionately to men, and young people disproportionately to older people. The full impact of the recession is still unfolding. From our research how to allocate shrinking resources and have those difficult conversations with local communities is indicated as one of the hottest topics over coming years. As a cohesion officer within a local authority told us, *'there is no more fat left to cut, - the decisions are going to become increasingly difficult and potentially have a greater impact on cohesion'*.

At the same time the shift towards localism, and the notion of civil society indicates a greater engagement of communities in making decisions about how local services are prioritised and delivered – more of us are going to be engaged in talking about who gets what, and who is most deserving. One Local Authority research participant commented on the introduction of co-production principles in his area *'staff need a different skill set entirely, and the politicians'*. We could all do with honing some of these skills for difficult conversations. As the JRF interim report on Working in Neighbourhoods in Bradford points out<sup>101</sup> *'Elected members found it challenging to manage debates in their wards on these complex and often controversial questions'*. They *'don't always have the skills and confidence to manage these complex conversations'*.

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<sup>100</sup> Cribb, J., Joyce, R. & Phillips, D. Living Standards, Poverty and inequality in the UK: 2012. Institute of Fiscal Studies. <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6196>

<sup>101</sup> Richardson, L. Working in neighbourhoods in Bradford: An interim summary of findings from the JRF Bradford programme: Working in Neighbourhoods Project 2011 <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/neighbourhood-working-Bradford-full.pdf>

Therefore we envisage the skills of dialogue and the confidence and competence of facilitating controversial conversations that we outlined in Chapter 5 are likely to become increasingly important in the years ahead.

## Potential areas for development in the field

In order for the good relations field to continue to be of good service to groups and communities and meet the current and future challenges we have described elsewhere, we suggest the following as potential areas for development and we look forward to discussing these further over the coming year:

- The development of a national voice for good relations work
- Improving the way we measure impact
- Linking practice to research more closely
- Dissemination of skills and expertise

### The development of a national voice for good relations work

We understand how challenging this is in the current context when many of the organisations we spoke to were struggling with having to allocate extra time to fundraising, and making reductions in their service. However, in such times collaboration could strengthen the case for this work:

- The development of a national voice for this work could enable skills, knowledge and good practice examples to be disseminated and shared widely.
- It could provide a channel for the voices of the diverse and varied communities that we serve to be heard more clearly.
- It could raise the profile of this work, and make the case for the development of more complex nuanced narratives.

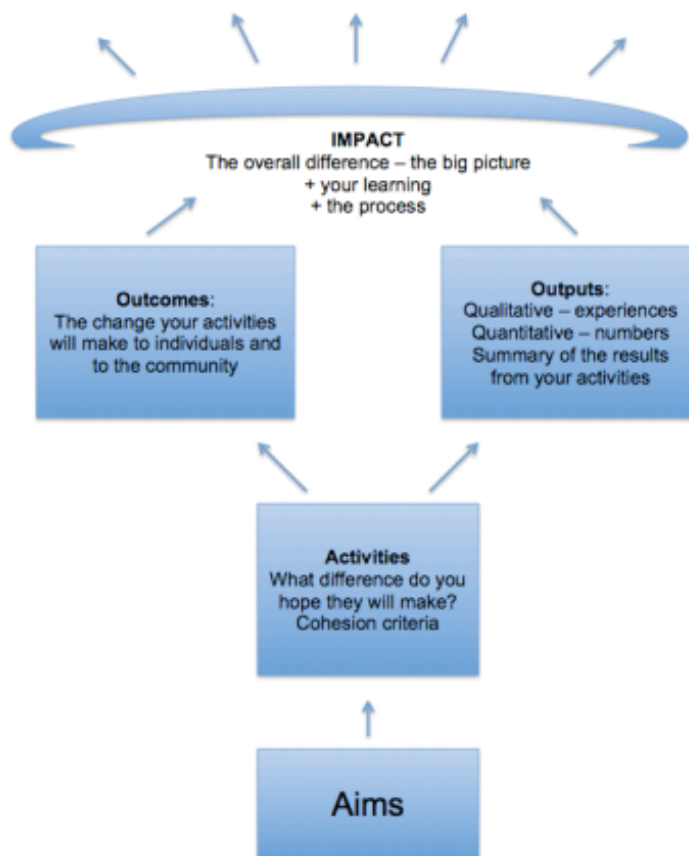
### Improving the way we measure impact

We are enthusiastic about the potential for improvement in impact measurement in good relations work. In the health field there is now significant data from longitudinal studies showing that the presence or absence of certain factors improves health in certain ways. We would very much like to use similar methodology to look further at a comparative study of protective factors in some English areas and their impact over time on levels of tension, disorder and hate.



Some key UK charities, social enterprises and donor foundations, are focusing significant attention at present on how we demonstrate the difference made by our work programmes<sup>102</sup>. The Charity Commission, Office for Civil Society and number of organisations such as ACEVO are collaborating to develop practice in this area. They have developed agreed principles and are seeking to improve access to workable impact measurement tools. Their targets include to make impact measurement ‘cheaper and easier to do’, ‘to reduce the reporting burden’, to provide ‘more affordable user friendly tools’<sup>103</sup>.

Much good work on evaluation has been developed by our research participants, and some have developed easy to use tools to track individual attitude and behaviour change. However there is more to do in terms of developing impact measurement tools for assessing community level change. There is much we could learn from each other and from other sectors in order to develop sensitive and appropriate tools for our field.



<sup>102</sup> The Principles of Good Impact reporting. (2011) The seven organisations responsible are New Philanthropy Capital, Acevo (Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations) Fundraising, The SROI Network, NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations).

<sup>103</sup> The Principles of Good Impact reporting. (2011) The seven organisations responsible are New Philanthropy Capital, Acevo (Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations) Fundraising, The SROI Network, NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations).

## Linking practice to research more closely

The last ten years in particular saw the development of new research into identity and prejudice, in groups and out groups, and some of the complex factors that influence our feelings and perceptions about others, communities and local areas. We have referenced some of that research in this report. Some of the practitioner organisations we interviewed are leading the way in developing closer links between the latest research and their practice in communities. In this way academic research can hone practice on the ground ensuring we are directing our energies and skills effectively, and in return practitioners can open up new questions and areas of research for examination.

## Dissemination of skills and expertise

*'Learning to sit in the fire'* requires training and lots of supported practice. A relatively small number, (possibly between 200 - 300 individuals), work in the intentional specialist organisations and have significant expertise and experience in dialogue about difficult and controversial local issues in England. Their skills are often developed by co-working with, and / or training from, others in the field.

Many of our research participants provide training in dialogue work. *'Much successful training is delivered using a cascade approach, so that community members can then provide their own communities with training, supported by coaching or mentoring from a specialist organisation'*. The experience of Talk for a Change in developing local networks is that, provided people are supported, training skills and tools are transferable and can significantly build capacity for good relations work at a local level.

## Building hope?

To conclude we return to the question of hope. Whilst appreciating the reservations of some of our research participants we think it is worth further discussion. It may be that rather than hope we should aim for resilience. Resilient communities are able to manage challenge and change without an increase in stress and tensions<sup>104</sup>. Having the resource of local people skilled and practised at dealing with community tensions and conflict can be hugely beneficial, and may be a protective factor when a crisis occurs.

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<sup>104</sup> For further thoughts on building resilient communities see Broadwood, J. & Sugden, N. pg 27 of Building Cohesive Communities (2009) <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/buildingcohesion>

However, as the Riots, Victims and Communities Panel points out hope is essentially about aspirations for the future<sup>105</sup>. So perhaps building both resilience and hope are important. One of the questions Talk for a Change have been asking the different groups and communities we have worked with over the years is 'Who holds the hope in your area?' We have never had anyone respond 'no-one'. Everyone has someone they can name in their local area who others turn to. J P Lederach wonders whether 'all peacework in the end comes down to finding and building voice'. Much of the work of our research participants is focused on this as a vital first step, We suspect that hope is cumulative and is developed through voice, but also through collective agency and actions for change. Many of our research participants saw this as the next step, and actions ranged from getting to know someone across cultural divides to young people becoming peer trainers, from acts of kindness and neighbourliness to campaigns which bring diverse community leaders together to tackle issues such as pay inequality and young people's safety<sup>106</sup>.

We give the last word over to residents, community members and activists we have worked with over the years and who are doing so much to build resilience and hope in local areas.

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<sup>105</sup> Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012 <http://riotspanel.independent.gov.uk/news/riots-communities-and-victims-panel-publishes-final-report/>

<sup>106</sup> City Safe Campaign by Citizens UK <http://www.citizensuk.org/campaigns/citysafe-campaign/>

## We asked who holds the hope in your community?

*The Young women's group are inspirational and give me energy, and have helped me from where I was to where I am now.*

*Ian, a brilliant networker, he's politically savvy, has a persistent commitment to community causes, long background of involvement locally and nationally.*

*The cat woman who knows everybody and everybody's cat.*

*My children - the activists.*

*Ann from the sunbed shop, she remembers everyone and asks after people but doesn't gossip, has done match making, been a shoulder to cry on, knows who is a bad 'un.*

*All the very cool older women who live here and are the shopkeeper, the hairdresser, the police locally.*

*Schools that operate as communities*

*Shaz holds the hope, she is connected to lots of people, takes a lead, has time for you, crosses faith divides, follows things up, is aware*

*Activists who organise resilience to government policy, planning changes, they galvanise.*

*Chair of our parish council, and our county councillor and our local community policeman. All working with young people and run sports and music groups in a poor rural community.*

*Kay, her house is an open house, she is a listener, allows people to be them, and still accepts them with their faults.*

*Our local councillor, and also a friend who works on racial equality, does peacebuilding work, his whole agenda is to bring people together.*

*A woman who has real enthusiasm for networks of all kinds, is an entrepreneur, always looks on the bright side, always smiling.*

*Our Local newsagent, who knows everyone, and everyone knows him. He always asks what you are doing, but he's not a gossiper or an inflamer, he is calm and measured, a key figure in whole community and in Asian community.*

*My lollipop lady*

*Hayley - has courage, charm, honesty, local knowledge.*

*People who give time, see the importance of the future generation, who look to the long term, ask children what they want, and believe things can get better.*

*A man living at the end of my street who does gardens for those who can't, looks after a neighbour with Mental Health difficulties, and speaks to all the neighbours.*

*Junilla who is a tireless worker for peace and justice. calm in the storm, steady, reliable, conciliator.*

*Suki and the volunteers who organise events for local community and involve lots of different people.*

*A carer, who always asks about people's wellbeing, helps to address issues, if he cant he knows someone who will, is very visible, will approach people, he cares, knows what goes on, uses local facilities.*

*Our allotment organiser, he chats to everyone, joins groups, gets things done.*

*The doers, the people who stand-up, ask, demand, knows their rights.*

*People like Grigor - compulsive networkers, enthusers, always smiling and always taking time to talk to people and is genuinely interested in what they have to say*

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