A councillor's workbook on facilitation and conflict resolution

Contents

Introduction

This workbook has been designed as a distance learning aid for local councillors. It is intended to provide councillors with insight and assistance with the key skills needed in relation to facilitation and conflict resolution to enable you to be effective in your role. Some of the content may be of most use to more newly elected councillors, but nonetheless if you have been a councillor for some time, the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key skills, approaches and tactics that make for an effective facilitator and mediator.

The workbook will help you to get up to speed on the main areas that require focus and attention. In effect, it should provide you with some pointers on how to develop a style and approach that you are comfortable with, and that enables you to be most effective in your day to day duties.

The workbook can be used as a standalone learning aid or alongside other material you may cover such as e learning modules or sessions within your own council. It is recognised that each individual must decide how best to use and develop their skills, based on individual preference and confidence. As such, the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map.

You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about your own approach and how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent. In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about your role in facilitation and conflict resolution.

These features are represented by the symbols shown below: This subject is also covered in a complementary councillor elearning module.

The elearning modules can be accessed at https://lms.learningnexus.co.uk/LGA/

Guidance – this is used to indicate guidance, research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.

Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.

Case studies – these are 'pen pictures' of approaches used by councils elsewhere.

Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information that may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information and support is also set out in the appendices to the workbook.

What is community conflict?

"Ever had a row about leaving the cap off the toothpaste and wondered what on earth brought that on?

Truth is, usually there is something more deep seated that 'if only you had said' could have been talked through and resolved much earlier.

It's no different in our world of local government – whether it's short-wiring in the Group, between groups, with council officers or key partners.

If we're ever going to leap the hurdles, bring about successful change, deal with difficult issues, agree and achieve common goals, facilitation is part of the toolkit.

From my own experience, leading a council as well as in opposition, we see things particularly clearly, while for others the view is much more 'hazy'! Good facilitation helps to cut through the fog and can bring agreement when it seems unlikely."

Cllr Alan Connett
Devon County Council

Community conflict can occur within your ward at any time. For example, it could be the result of intergenerational tensions, with older residents feeling that the behaviour of young people is unacceptable and as a result is contributing to neighbourhood decline. Occasionally the conflict results from an escalation in tensions between different ethnic groups or established and newly-arriving communities. Elsewhere, there may be conflicts within communities as a result of criminal activity, such as drug dealing, street violence or prostitution. Your council and its partner agencies may need to spend valuable time, effort and resources trying to identify, understand and resolve these disputes. But to ignore the rising tensions can present far greater problems, including the escalation of the conflict and potentially this can have more destructive impacts on the people you serve.

As a community leader, you can play a pivotal role in keeping close to your residents and understanding their needs, views and concerns.

Conflict occurs when different groups in the community decide that the way they see the world is different from how others see it. Understanding where people are coming from is the first step in helping to prevent conflict. And as this workbook will demonstrate, there are many tactics, approaches and strategies you can adopt in resolving disputes between local people before they can escalate into disorder or even violence.

Recognising conflict

Guidance

"If we can really understand the problem, the answer will come out of it, because the answer is not separate from the problem".

Jidda Krishnamurti
Indian guru (1895-1986)

Helping to prevent conflict – a member perspective

Guidance

"As elected members we will face many issues or conflicts, therefore we have a duty to seek conflict resolution.

We should be a mediator and pragmatic as well as good listener and engaging widely with people. The best way to be successful is to know the topic or root cause of the issue well, which sometimes teaches us and increases our knowledge."

Cllr Saima Ashraf
Barking and Dagenham

Facilitation and conflict resolution is nothing new. And it doesn't need to be something large scale or policy-driven. Much of the work that local authorities do around **community cohesion** and **tension monitoring** is an attempt to understand, prevent and respond to actual or potential community conflicts on a comprehensive and consistent basis. As a councillor it is important that you are familiar with this work and adhere to any guidance or protocols that your council has in place.

However, many of the community conflicts you are likely to encounter may be small-scale and localised in comparison. They are also likely to be disputes in which early and continued intervention can help to prevent and resolve potential difficulties.

A diversity of views is not necessarily a bad thing

Every community will contain groups of people whose views, and the articulation of these, may frequently differ and be in conflict. It may also be difficult to get different people to reach consensus on some issues where opinions are deeply entrenched.

Added to this, individuals and groups may hold different assumptions about problems, solutions or potential courses of action and will seek different types of information to support their case or cause. This is not necessarily a problem, but the reality of living in a democratic society. Most conflicts can be prevented or resolved if the following conditions are in place:

- people are prepared to listen first and talk/ act second

- everyone's contribution to a debate or discussion is respected and valued

- those in dispute are willing to amend their viewpoint in the light of others' suggestions

- questions are used positively to encourage others to elaborate on their thoughts

- those involved look to build on ideas and identify areas of common ground from which to build rapport.

Situations in which conflict is difficult to resolve:

- where people are only interested in giving their own views and are not willing to listen to others

- individuals talk as if there is only one course of action

- any discussion is punctuated with threatened or actual aggression/violence

- questions are used to attack and undermine others

- discussion and debate is used only to 'score points'

- there is no willingness or attempt to identify areas of common ground.

Guidance

"Councillors will frequently need to liaise between residents they represent and the officers of the council. Local people on the ground tend to have the best view of what is going on and sometimes it can be a case of trying to help officers understand how their policies interact with real life.

Local authorities don't exactly live in ivory towers but they sometimes get out of touch with how the much-vaunted public services are actually received. Things go well when you can get officers and residents together to solve problems."

Cllr Adam Zerny
Central Bedfordshire

Challenge 1 – preventing a 'storm in a teacup'

Imagine you are faced with the following situation. What could you do to prevent the dispute from escalating into a damaging community conflict?

You have been invited to chair a public meeting to discuss views on the location of a new community centre within an area subject to a large regeneration programme – a vocal group from another area (not subject to regeneration) is threatening to dominate the discussions and 'shout down' any views expressed.

How would you best use your facilitation and conflict resolution skills to prevent an escalation of tensions?

To prevent conflict occurring, we need to understand why it might occur in the first place. This is about keeping your ear close to the ground – understanding what is happening in your ward, what the hot topics of conversation are and what is 'keeping people awake at night'.

Your role in preventing and resolving disputes

Guidance
As a ward councillor you may be able to take action to solve many of the problems facing your community. However, it is unlikely that you can act alone to resolve all areas of potential dispute. Even if you could, your action alone might be damaging to community relations. Sometimes people need to solve their own problems and resolve their own issues.

In this situation, your role is more about facilitation. This is about bringing people together, helping to build trust and understanding, speaking up for those who may be largely unheard, sharing relevant information and ensuring that all views are respected.

Most conflict resolution is likely to be done in face to face discussions and meetings, though you may also be required to act as a 'go-between' in preventing and resolving disputes between groups that refuse to meet or interact directly. In either case, your key tasks are likely to include:

• **Listening** – actively finding out what people think and want through surveys or dialogue

• **Questioning** – using sympathetic questioning to get to the 'heart of an issue', to generate thoughts and ideas and to challenge extreme views, uninformed opinions and misleading information.

• **Advocacy** – ensuring that local voices are heard when issues are debated and decisions are taken. This can often involve speaking up for 'seldom heard' groups whose views may be unspoken, underrepresented or frequently ignored.

• **Facilitating** – helping individuals and groups to come together to discuss issues affecting them, to debate different points of view and to reach consensus on possible solutions.

• **Sharing information** – talking to people and providing information in plain English to enable them to understand the issues under dispute, eg avoiding the use of council jargon and technical or legalistic language

Alongside this, it is important to recognise that as a ward member you have the ability to influence greatly how people behave in situations where emotions may be running high by demonstrating:

• energy and enthusiasm

• a calm, even tempered, disposition

• an ability to be flexible and adaptable to different people and situations

• strong listening and observation skills

• an ability to act impartially or with neutrality

• self-confidence and gravitas.

Facilitation

"The act of assisting or making easier the progress or improvement in something"

Challenge 2 – understanding the source of potential conflict

Consider the case study below. How could this ward member have improved his approach to understanding the source of potential conflict?

Bob Charmers represents a rural ward in a small shire district council. Every two months he attends a public meeting in a village hall where his residents can raise issues of local concern. In recent weeks, Bob has received a large number of letters, emails and telephone calls from angry home owners, who are concerned about an increase in anti-social behaviour close to the site of an unauthorised camp of new age travellers in the ward. His response is to ask the residents to raise the issue at the next village hall meeting. In the meantime, he fires off a couple of quick emails to the director of environmental services asking her if she can do anything to move the travellers on.

When Bob attends the subsequent village hall meeting, matters have escalated to a serious level. Local police officers have made a number of arrests following a wide range of incidents including assault, arson and criminal damage. The source of the trouble appears to have been a small group of teenagers from a local housing estate who have sought to use violence and intimidation in an attempt to evict the travellers.

Bob's meeting is attended by both local residents and members of the travelling community – both want a peaceful resolution to the problems and want Bob to help.

Bringing people together

Managing any conflicts that have arisen will require you to share information about what has occurred and make efforts to bring people together for some form of resolution. If trust has not broken down completely and the conflict has not yet got out of hand, there is obvious merit in bringing together the widest range of interested groups at a public meeting.

A further workbook in this series on **chairing skills** can provide you with good ideas on planning such a public meeting and the key skills of a chair in creating the right tone and style for the meeting, encouraging contributions from people and enabling decisions to be reached.

Having brought people together, it is likely that in the first instance people will want to raise their concerns and may be initially reluctant to move too quickly to discuss what should be done to address them. There is some value in letting people air their differences, but only if the discussion is managed to prevent tempers flaring and getting out of hand. It may be that in a first meeting, the best outcome you can hope for is to get people to agree to meet and talk again. In this sense, the meeting should be seen as the start of conflict resolution and not an end in itself.

Your role as a facilitator will be crucial in helping people to resolve their difficulties. Tactics and approaches that can help in this respect will include:

- setting a positive tone and modelling the 'norms' for group interaction

- being yourself, without defensiveness or hidden agendas, and sharing your experiences and feelings to establish empathy

- describing what you see rather than being judgemental, eg "on the basis of what you've said, you don't look to be supportive…"

- being empathetic – showing you understand people's situation, needs and feelings, ie trying not to give advice, judgements or interpretations.

Resolving conflicts

- Maintaining your assertiveness, but avoiding displays of unnecessary emotion (weakness or aggression) and unhelpful behaviours such as irritators (eg "I think what he has said is **very** reasonable"), immediate counter-attacks and talking over the top of people.

- Keeping people and problems separate, ie recognise that in many cases other people are not just 'being difficult' – real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging relationships.

- Encouraging people to explore options together and be open to the idea that a 'third way' may exist.

- Listening first and talking second – to facilitate any form of resolution, you must first understand where different people are coming from.

- Focusing on getting the support of the 'early adopters', ie there will usually be a proportion of people in any group who are open to new ideas or new ways of doing things. Their support can often be influential in encouraging the more resistant to come forward, over time, in support of a resolution.

Challenge 3 – effective facilitation of community conflicts

Imagine you are facilitating the following public meeting. What tactics could you employ to assist in bringing people together and resolving their disputes?

A mixed group of older and younger people who have come together to discuss the issue of escalating street violence on a housing estate.

Reflect on your answers.

Lots of work could clearly be done in planning and setting up the meeting before people arrive, eg ensuring that all interested parties are invited, clarifying the purpose of the meeting and ensuring that the layout of any tables and chairs is conducive to open discussion.

Your role in setting the right tone for the meeting will be vital. Perhaps you could give a short introduction, setting out the various concerns (without being judgemental) and emphasising that you are keen to explore areas of common ground. As the discussions unfold, you will need to use your facilitation skills in encouraging good debate, marginalising unhelpful contributions/behaviour and building trust and rapport with those present. As we will see later, this is about striving for a 'win win' resolution throughout the process.

Good facilitation will require you to understand some of the fundamental principles involved in resolving disputes (see text box). You should also consider what the most appropriate focus should be for the public meeting before bringing people together. For example:

- to facilitate communication between parties in conflict when levels of antagonism make normal communication difficult or impossible

- to identify the causes of conflict on a joint basis

- to create a safe environment for participants to share their assumptions and explore possible solutions

- to encourage people to identify common ground and, if differences persist, to encourage empathy about other people's perspectives.

Of course in some situations you may wish to concentrate on all four aspects, but practically it may be as well to limit your focus in any one meeting to one or two clear objectives. Concentrating on building the dialogue, trust and confidence of the group may well be more important than trying to resolve their difficulties in one quick hit.

Getting those involved in different sides of a dispute to agree on areas of common ground is the key challenge you are likely to face in facilitation and conflict resolution. For some groups, the idea of finding mutually acceptable solutions may be a completely new experience for them – particularly if the dispute has a long history and opinions are suitably entrenched. The **LGA workbook on chairing skills** will also be useful in helping you deal with the challenges and issues around setting the tone and 'temper' for a good meeting.

> ### Conflict resolution: fundamental principles
>
> Conflict is not inherently destructive, but a normal aspect of any vibrant community. The danger of viewing conflict as inherently negative is that it attempts to avoid or suppress it at all costs and problems are left to fester.
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>
> A thorough and comprehensive analysis of the causes, conditions and manifestations of the conflict taking all of the different perceptions and perspectives seriously should inform conflict resolution activities.
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>
> Superficial and one-sided assumptions will inevitably lead to counter-productive interventions.
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> Conflict resolution processes should be inclusive of all parties that are involved.
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>
> Conflict resolution activities should take place with the consent of and preferably at the invitation of the various protagonists.
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>
> The mediators or other third parties should be non-partisan and unbiased in the relationship with the disputing parties.
>
> Taken from 'Community Conflict: Causes and Action', Lemos & Crane, 2004

Facilitating an agreement

Your approach to facilitation can help or hinder any attempt at conflict resolution.

Having planned the meeting and helped to set the tone and style of the ensuing discussions, your key tasks are to manage the debate and use a suitable questioning approach to probe, test and challenge others to get to the nub of the issues in dispute. In this respect, questioning is a powerful and essential tool, enabling you to:

- get to the 'heart of the matter'

- gather evidence and clarify and expand on initial views or early information

- elicit information without making respondents feel intimidated or prejudged

- facilitate inclusion, buy-in and ownership of problems and build rapport with people.

Other workbooks in this series can provide you with more detailed information on effective questioning techniques.

The process of conflict resolution will also require you to manage the personalities involved. People respond in different, sometimes unpredictable, ways when trying to convince others of their point of view. This is true enough in one to one situations, but is particularly so in group meetings.

Effective questioning

Hints and tips

To resolve a conflict you should use a range of questioning techniques:

Closed questions – direct questions that require a one word answer, eg 'yes' or 'no'

Open questions – the 'how', 'why' and 'what' type of questions that require a more expansive response.

Leading/limiting questions – questions designed to limit the range of possible answers, eg 'Is it true that…?'

Soft commands – prompts which sound like questions to elicit information, eg 'Perhaps you could explain…'

Paraphrasing/summarising – repeating what you have heard and asking for a confirmation of accuracy.

Recognising that people often behave differently in groups can help you, tactically, to be more effective in resolving disputes. Much of this is about watching and listening to group behaviour and exercising your own judgement about when to intervene and when to sit back as discussions unfold and people exchange views or come into conflict.

For example:

- Who contributes the most and least to the discussion – are they aware of it and could you challenge them?

- Who are the silent people – is their silence about dissent or fear and could your intervention encourage them to be more vocal?

- What is the atmosphere in the group – could you mediate to create more congenial conditions?

- Have the discussions reached a sticking point – could you broker some negotiation or compromise to move things forward?

- Does anybody impose their views on others – could you ask for others' opinions to challenge this?

- Who are the rebels, bullies, critics and scapegoats – can you employ different tactics to deal with each?

In dispute situations, people will often adopt a preferred style or approach to get what they want. These are sometimes referred to as the 'street fighter', 'expressive creator', 'amiable pacifier' and 'analytical thinker' styles.

A guide to dispute styles

Street fighter – their goal is clear – they want to win. Their approach can be intimidating and they will scare people into agreement by emphasising that only their solution will work. They may come across as hard and domineering and may tend to dig themselves into a position. Determined to get what they want, they may find it hard to budge – even when this is the sensible thing to do.

Expressive creator – their goal is to influence other people. In approach, they will try to inspire others and will enjoy trying to sway others. They may come across as excitable and in their enthusiasm to change other people's minds may not be sensitive to what is really going on in the meeting

Amiable pacifier – their goal is agreement and they will generally believe that if they can get everyone to agree on something, everything else will fall into place. In approach they will focus on developing relationships with others but may be seen as being soft and giving in too easily.

Analytical thinker – their goal is to have order at the meeting and they are likely to believe that adhering to formal procedures will produce a result. In approach they will ignore relationships and focus on facts. They may be perceived as detached from the human dimensions of the conflict and too process-driven.

While each may have its merits, and enable a degree of success to be achieved in community conflicts, all have their disadvantages. Recognising these different styles can help you as a facilitator to challenge the tactics employed by people. Your objective should be to achieve a 'win-win' situation, ie where any resolution is, in effect, a good outcome for all involved. In practice you will learn to separate the people involved from the problems faced and will be

soft on people but hard on the issues under dispute. While you will be easy going, friendly, likeable and courteous to all, you will be resolute in continuing to work away on the problem. Tactically you will seek to create options where nobody appears to lose. This can be done by working to get people away from positions taken because of their personality styles, so that they can concentrate on interests.

Other facilitation tactics will help in achieving a 'win-win' resolution. For example:

• questioning rather than talking

• listening instead of interrupting

• summarising rather than diluting arguments

• identifying and building on common ground as opposed to point-scoring, attacking or blaming

• emphasising areas of agreement instead of areas of dispute

• building on ideas rather than continuous counter proposals

• describing your feelings in preference to the use of irritators, eg 'with respect' and 'frankly' etc.

Having achieved an outcome that is agreed by all parties, the final key step is to summarise what has been resolved. This ensures that everyone is made aware of what has been discussed and what is being proposed. At this stage it may be appropriate to 'park' certain issues that the meeting has failed to agree on, so that these do not scupper an agreement on the more substantive points under discussion. Some further action should be identified, however, to revisit these matters at a future date, eg possibly at a subsequent meeting. Wherever possible you should follow up the meeting with a written summary of the resolved matters so that everyone remains clear about the way forward. In some cases this maybe best done by drawing up a formal 'resolution agreement'.

Challenge 4 – dealing with the personalities

Imagine you are facilitating a public meeting to discuss why there have been problems in community relations between the settled community in your ward and a newly-arriving community of refugees from another country. The following characters are at the meeting. What tactics could you employ to deal with each?

a) A noisy and aggressive resident of the settled community who insists on challenging anything said by the refugee community?

b) An elder from the newly-arriving community who has been extremely helpful in calming tensions between different community groups, but who appears reluctant to speak up at a public meeting?

c) A member of an extremist political group who appears to have arrived at the meeting with the sole intention of chanting racist abuse?

The use of mediation

In most cases – as a ward councillor or a community leader – you will be ideally placed to act as the facilitator in resolving community conflicts. However, there may well be situations where the nature of the dispute, the problems faced, or personalities involved make your involvement inappropriate or inadvisable In these situations you should consider the use of an independent mediator.

Mediation has been used with varying degrees of success in many different kinds of conflict, including interpersonal, family, industrial relations, community, environmental and international disputes. Mediation involves interviewing all interested parties individually before bringing representatives of the opposing groups together to move the situation forward and find a resolution. In most cases a trained and experienced mediator is the key to success.

Mediation

In mediation, an independent third party (the mediator) helps parties with a dispute to try to reach an agreement. The mediator is impartial and manages the process which is usually a face-to-face meeting in three stages:

• working out what your issues are

• working out what your options are

• working out an agreement.

The most common models of mediation are:

facilitative – non-directive

evaluative – makes suggestions

rights-based – ensures agreement meets statutory rights/legal entitlements.

http://asauk.org.uk/archive/alternative-dispute-resolution/

Preventing future conflicts

In your day to day role as a ward member there are many ways in which you can work to prevent disputes developing into wider community conflicts. We mentioned earlier in the workbook that much of this is about listening to your constituents and being alert to the problems that are developing in your ward. Other ideas you could consider include:

• Monitoring many of the factors in your ward that may allow conflict to breed (eg environmental degradation, unemployment, weakening community bonds/ties, crime and anti-social behaviour) and ensuring that action is taken to address these wherever possible.

• Providing reassurance to those who may be vulnerable and unable to speak up for themselves.

• Ensuring that partner agencies take action against individuals who threaten the well-being of the area and may provoke community conflict.

• Helping to build coalitions between different community groups, voluntary sector agencies and statutory organisations to strengthen community ties, build trust and develop social capital.

• Making use of the Community Call for Action (CCfA) enshrined with the Police and Justice Act (2006). This enables ward members to raise, on behalf of local people, matters relating to community safety. Where a satisfactory solution cannot be negotiated, members are able to refer issues to their overview and scrutiny committee(s) for consideration. This facility might be useful in helping to prevent community conflicts.

Summary

Social research often highlights that there are more neighbourhoods experiencing community conflict than is commonly assumed. It is often a highly localised phenomenon that is practically invisible except to those living in the middle of it.

While the dynamics of many community disputes can be complex and often obscure, it is clear that the use of facilitation and conflict resolution to establish the common ground between people can be enormously beneficial in preventing as escalation of tensions and the fermentation of wider community conflicts. In most cases this task can be carried out highly effectively by ward members in their role as community leaders.

"Social psychological research on interdependence reveals that when people believe that they need each other, they tend to relinquish their initial prejudices and stereotypes and join in programmes that foster mutual interaction and co-operation. The implication is that urban leaders, especially political leaders, should work to create situations that foster feelings of interdependence, situations that enhance co-operation, not competition"

W J Wilson, 'The Roots of Racial Tension', 2003.

Where do you go from here?

Challenge 5

1. Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

a) What key action points can you identify to improve the way you facilitate group discussions and resolve real or potential conflicts, ie what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

b) Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, eg further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

Appendix
sources of further information

Printed publications

The councillors' guide
www.local.gov.uk

The LGA website has many pages discussing community leadership and a number of publications, a series of case studies, the Knowledge Hub, and development programmes for councillors and council officers.

For more information please go to
www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership

'Understanding and monitoring tension and conflict in local communities – Second Edition'
www.tedcantle.co.uk/publications/033%20
Tension%20monitoring%20guidance%20
iCoCo%202010.pdf

Tension Monitoring Toolkit', Institute of Community Cohesion
www.tedcantle.co.uk/publications/033%20
Tension%20monitoring%20guidance%20
iCoCo%202010.pdf

'Dispute Resolution Toolkit', Housing Ombudsman Service/Housing Corporation/ Age Concern/Compas@TPAS
www.tpas.org.uk

Useful websites

The LGA website is an invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government
www.local.gov.uk

Lemos & Crane
www.lemosandcrane.co.uk/home/about

The Young Foundation
The Young Foundation undertakes research to identify and understand social needs and then develops practical initiatives and institutions to address them.
www.youngfoundation.org

Advice Services Alliance
http://asauk.org.uk/archive/alternative-dispute-resolution/

AgeUK
Advice Line on 0800 169 6565
www.ageuk.org.uk

For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
We consider requests on an individual basis.

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