



cohesioncounts
building and measuring community cohesion

Bridge building between communities

**Good Relations Oldham
report for Cohesion Counts**

Project: BRIDGE BUILDING BETWEEN COMMUNITIES (GRO)

Project location: OLDHAM

Organisation: GOOD RELATIONS OLDHAM

Organisations' key activity: Bridge-building between women from the ARC and Fatima Women's Association (FWA)

What are the background issues that led to a need for community cohesion projects?

Alt is an estate of approximately 500 homes, mainly council housing with some private, and is due for massive regeneration within the next 10 years. It is a predominantly white population with very few S.E. Asian residents. The estate primary school is due to be relocated as part of the regeneration which will have an impact on women from South East Asian heritage from neighbouring communities whose children attend the school.

Glodwick is an adjacent area of mixed housing, predominantly pre 1919 terraces with pockets of social housing. Pakistani heritage residents are in the majority although there is a significant Bangladeshi population and, more recently, an influx of economic migrants from the E.U.

Whilst Alt and Glodwick are adjacent areas, there is little natural interaction between the two areas. Alt residents pass through Glodwick to access the town centre but Glodwick residents have no need to go to Alt unless their children are attending the school. There are perceptions that Alt is unwelcoming to residents from S.E. Asian heritage, there is an equal perception that Glodwick is unwelcoming to white residents.

Why is the project appropriate for this area and community?

This piece of work came out of the Good Relations Oldham (GRO) conflict awareness training with Alt residents. One of the trainers was of Pakistani heritage and the white women who were attending the training asked her a range of questions about her culture and her religion. It seemed a shame that – with the ethnic make-up of the adjacent area - that people were not able to find answers to their questions by simply asking their nearest neighbours. There was a real appetite to meet from both groups so, from the “accident” of having a trainer from a different ethnic and religious background, this good relations project was developed.

What were the project's aims and objectives?

- To develop a better understanding of each other's organisations and community.
- To understand the nature of myths and stereotyping.
- To investigate common concerns and interests.
- To enable the development of longer-term relationships between the organisations.
- To investigate common concerns and interests.
- To forge links between individuals

Who was the project intended to benefit, how were participants recruited and who did it benefit in the end?

The project was designed to benefit the individuals who attended but also to benefit the two organisations – ARC and FWA. Participants were self-selecting but they had to have a connection with one of the organisations – either as volunteers or attendees. FWA also have paid workers, two of whom supported and participated in some of the sessions.

Some participants attended all the sessions whilst others attended when they could. Whilst the individuals did benefit, it is hoped that better relationships between the organisations will enable them to develop work together in the future to benefit their communities more widely.

What actually happened at the sessions?

Three sessions were held where we looked at the pressing issues in each area, along with perceptions of each other's area and where those perceptions came from. We looked at common concerns as well as differences and how perceptions can become "facts" if they are not challenged.

We also looked at personal perspectives, how stereotyping can limit our opportunities and how we can deal with that. We used some exercises so that the women were supported to share personal stories and it was clear from this that the commonalities were greater than the differences. In the final session, we had a really interesting and informed discussion about stereotyping and perceptions, which led to a discussion about joint working in the future.

What went well and what would you do differently?

We were very lucky that the two lead women from ARC and FWA were very committed to the idea of getting together. They had done some work in the past together but had found it difficult to sustain this with funding being a particular issue. The women got on very well and had little

difficulty talking to each other to share ideas and perceptions. Sometimes it was difficult to get them to focus on the issues connected to the project's objectives but, on reflection, we did achieve the objectives.

We have built in some ongoing relationships through P4C training and a project that the two groups will be working on together in the future. We will support the facilitation of a P4C session once the women have been trained so they can share the technique more widely and build up their skills. We arranged for one of the women from ARC to be taken to an Asian fabric shop which she had felt unable to do on her own.

We perhaps didn't have enough time to develop individual relationships and to get the women to work in pairs – one from each area. This would have felt very forced in the short time we had to work with the group but is something we will be able to look at in the P4C session where it will feel more natural.

What else would you like people to know about this project?

We had a tight timeline for this project and sometimes it felt like we were trying to force the pace with the participants. We did the first session in November but ARC then said that they couldn't commit to anything else until after Christmas which meant we lost a bit of momentum. We would look at how we timetable work in the future.

We did three sessions – 1 at the ARC, 1 at FWA and the final one at the ARC again – mainly because their facilities were better. It was clear that the FWA women would have preferred to have met at their premises again. We would look to finding a neutral venue for some sessions in the future and use that as an opportunity to take women together out of their areas to enjoy different experiences and places together.

Finally, bridge-building activities are really the first stage of building relations between communities and there has to be a focus for continuing and developing the relationship after the first contact has been made.