



cohesioncounts
building and measuring community cohesion

Conflict awareness training in communities

**Good Relations Oldham report
for Cohesion Counts**

Project: CONFLICT AWARENESS TRAINING IN COMMUNITIES

Location: ALT FCHO ESTATE IN OLDHAM

Organisation: GOOD RELATIONS OLDHAM

Organisations' key activity: Training in Conflict Awareness and Mediation Skills, Improving communication and understanding both within and between communities in Oldham.

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. Eventually the estate will be made up of social housing, affordable housing and private housing. Unemployment, teenage pregnancies and anti-social behaviour are very high in the area and in the most recent Oldham-wide "You and your Community" survey Alt was highlighted as an area where people had a very low sense of belonging to their neighbourhood.

The majority of Alt residents are white British and the area is adjacent to the predominantly Asian heritage area of Glodwick. The estate primary school does attract pupils from Glodwick and is due to be relocated further into the heart of the estate during the proposed regeneration.

Why is the project appropriate for this area and community?

Good Relations Oldham (GRO) aim is to build good relations within and between the communities of Oldham by reducing community tensions and preventing conflict and supporting communities and organisations in managing and resolving disputes. The project delivers three strands of work:- mediation services, building good relations and conflict awareness and conflict resolution training.

One of the areas of concern which came out of early stakeholder meetings was that two separate community organisations operating in the area were experiencing conflict. It was perceived that they were competing for resources and service users and residents were unlikely to use both facilities, choosing one or the other according to personal loyalties. The assessment process we employed identified that there was conflict within the community but it was not focused on the 2 organisations.

It was clear that there were tensions more generally between some service providers and residents which at this stage were not clearly articulated. Proposals for the area were an underlying concern and there was nervousness about their impact on the community.

The conflict awareness training provided an opportunity for residents to develop processes that would help them handle conflict well and support other residents to do so.

What were the project's aims and objectives?

To undertake an assessment of the relationships that exist between the two community organisations, their members and prospective members, existing and prospective members of the community of Alt and between the residents and officers from organisations that provided services in Alt.

This assessment helped us to understand the relationships that exist within the community and provide recommendations of interventions that would help residents to build better relationships. We aimed through conflict awareness training to create a network of local residents who had developed processes to help them to handle conflict well.

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

We made initial contact with the volunteers of Arc and Alt TRA who attended confidential meetings with GRO practitioners. We also spoke to officers from service providers during the assessment which took place during April and May 2009.

The volunteers from both groups together with other residents of Alt were invited to take part in the Conflict Awareness training. The day, time and venue were agreed and around 20 people accepted places. In the event 6 people attended. This meant that we had to do some intensive work with the groups and eventually a further 6 people (one attending the course twice) completed the training.

The participants were recruited through direct contact and through word of mouth. As a relationship had already been built up through the assessment process, it meant that it was possible to explain the purpose and benefits of the training in a more personal way than would have been possible through more general advertising.

What actually happened?

For the assessment, we met with people from both groups, active members of the community who were not part of either group, and staff from service providers such as the major

landlord and Greater Manchester Police. Most meetings were held with individuals but one focus group was convened.

At each session, the remit of GRO was explained and the purpose of the work that GRO had been commissioned to carry out in the Alt area. The aim was to find out what the existing relationships between individuals, community groups and service providers in Alt was like. All participants agreed that specific identifying details of these meetings would be confidential, but the main points would be used in a report.

One day conflict awareness training was offered to the groups and it was agreed that the format of a full day would be difficult for people to commit to so it was agreed to split into 2 sessions delivered over 2 consecutive Thursday evenings. We also delivered the training over 4 sessions on Wednesday mornings to accommodate the needs of the volunteers at the Arc.

What went well and what would you do differently?

The meetings with the community members went very well with some saying that this was an opportunity to have their views heard in a 'safe environment'. The assessment report contained the individual views of people without compromising anonymity. Despite the initial low take-up of the training, reorganising it to suit the different attendees paid off and it was well received by participants.

Some participants have gone on to the next stage of GRO's training programme and requests to attend future conflict awareness courses from other community members have been received. It took time to establish trust with the groups, their management committees and the service providers in Alt but now that links have been forged, we will stay in contact with the community and thereby extend the network of community members involved in the Good Relations Oldham project.

The assessment process identified the need and appetite for a separate piece of work which is described in [\(link to bridge building report\)](#)

What else should people know about this project?

This project was aimed at volunteers in community organisations and they had many competing priorities that seriously limited any time they had for new initiatives that did not immediately respond to self-identified needs.

Because the GRO approach is based on giving control to participants, they determine the content and shape of the work so practitioner responses need to be both flexible and highly skilled.

Building relationships within the community was time well spent and its importance cannot be overstated. Maintaining those relationships is equally important which GRO will do through our network.

The time constraints for the project meant that we were not able to tackle the tensions between the community and some organisations in the area. If, however, these become an issue in the future we already have established credibility in the area on which we will be able to build.