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# Dealing with Conflict

Working in a Community Council may not, at first sight, appear to have much to do with "politics", and all Community Councils should act as non-political bodies in the party political sense.

However, it has to be recognised that the work of Community Councils concerns the exercise of power, albeit at a very local level. For example, there is the power to:

- Get things done in the community;

- Approach other tiers of government;

- Raise funds to support particular projects;

- Allocate resources within the community, and so on.

Wherever power is exercised there is always the possibility of conflict developing. This may be because individuals and organisations find themselves competing for access to the resources in the community. Or it may be simply that individuals or organisations wish to demonstrate their ability to wield power and influence in the community. Whatever the reason, conflict can break out from time to time even in the most peaceful of communities. When it does it is important to know how to deal with it effectively so that major rifts do not develop in the community

Because community harmony is so important Community Councils need to ensure that, as far as possible, they exercise their power in a fair and reasonable manner. They should also try to ensure that they work in a tactful and diplomatic manner, liaising and consulting with individuals and other organisations in the community wherever possible.

## Conflict within Community Councils

It also has to be recognised that conflict can break out within Community Councils, just as in any other part of the community. It may be that conflicts are imported into the context of the Community Council from outside, or it may be that conflict breaks out because of a particular issue that is on the agenda. It is useful to think about dealing with such conflict before you actually find yourself in the situation. This gives you a chance to work out a strategy before you get caught up in the emotion of the event.

## Personality Clashes

Conflict which relates to personality clash is one of the most difficult to deal with because the actual issue over which the clash takes place may simply provide an opportunity for the participant to demonstrate their strongly opposing views.

Where this is the case they may be less concerned with reaching agreement or getting through the Community Council's agenda than with addressing their own personal agenda. Such personality clashes can make other Community Council Members feel uncomfortable, and can prove damaging in the long term to the work of the Community Council.

In this situation it is worthwhile remembering that it is not usually possible to change a person's personality. If there are certain things which someone is doing that cause conflict in the group, rudely interrupting other people for example, or monopolising the discussion, it may be possible to find a way of persuading that person to change his/her behaviour. This can sometimes be achieved by the use of good-natured humour, aimed at making the person aware of the behaviour that other people find offensive. At other times it may be necessary to try to persuade the Chairperson to intervene more forcefully so as to prevent that behaviour leading to conflict.

In any case it is generally a good idea for Community Council Members to talk about how they feel about "difficult" behaviour, otherwise there is a danger that communication will break down and conflict will emerge eventually in an even more damaging form.

## Conflict over Community Issues

Another form of conflict that you might come across in meetings relates to the particular community issues on the agenda, rather than personality clashes. From time to time issues will arise that some Members feel particularly strongly about. This may be because of their personal beliefs or values, or it may be because they are representing the strong views that are held in sections of the community.

If you do find yourself in this sort of conflict it is important to show that, even if you don't see things the same way as the other person(s), you do recognise that they feel strongly about the issue, and you understand what their concern is. You should then explain your feelings on the matter, being firm but friendly, trying wherever possible to find concerns that you share with them. Then move on to the areas where you differ and try to use their ideas as a base on which to build a solution that is acceptable to all concerned.

**For example:**

*"I understand your concern about X and think that it's something that we ought to do something about. However, I would want to approach the problem from a different angle because I think that Y is important too. Why don't we do Z, which will meet your concerns about X and my concerns about Y?"*

In this way it is possible to demonstrate to other people that you are able to listen to other people's ideas as well as presenting your own. By demonstrating your ability to listen you will also increase the likelihood that other people will listen to you. In all types of conflict a member arriving at the meeting "all fired up" about a particular issue is unlikely to act constructively or agree compromise. A shrewd Chairperson will, as early as possible, allow both sides ample time to state their case and then try to engineer a compromise.

Planning issues can often arouse considerable feelings, conflict and are potentially divisive. It is important that all sides are given the opportunity to make their views known and the role of the Chairperson can be crucial in managing a difficult situation.

Depending on the circumstances, it may be useful to hear representations from prospective developers and from those that are either supporting or objecting to development proposals.  It is important that equal opportunity is given to all sides and in these circumstances, time limiting contributions may be appropriate.

**Next steps**

If you find yourself in a situation where despite your best efforts to resolve conflicts both internally and externally, you are advised to contact your CCLO immediately or for further information and guidance refer to the Standing orders – Obstructive and Offensive Conduct and/or Section 4 of the handbook relating to community council complaints.