The CAG Project
Conflict Resolution Guide & Policy

1. Introduction
This policy has been written by The CAG Oxfordshire Project staff and recommends best practice guidance and procedures for individual members and groups within the CAG Oxfordshire Network to follow when experiencing conflict within their group or between members or individuals. The CAG Project Oxfordshire staff will also follow these procedures when encountering conflict.

What is conflict?
- Conflict can be painful, stressful and it can consume time within a group. However, conflict is a normal part of human interactions – what is more important is how you deal with it.
- People often take a traditional "punitive" response to managing conflict i.e. finding out who is "wrong" and punishing them. However, conflict isn't always that straight forward. Conflict should be approached holistically and openly.
- Conflict might be manifested in:
  - a lack of clarity, knowledge or communication within the activities, processes or dynamics of the group
  - Structures and systems used by the group no longer suit their purpose or needs of those using them
  - Situational pressures acting on the group e.g. lack of time / resources, burn-out etc.
  - An imbalance in power or hierarchy in the group
- Conflict is a feedback in any relationship or system at an individual, interpersonal or group level, signalling that some needs are unmet or unbalanced.
- Conflict is also a signal that change is trying to happen. Examining the conflict can give information and learning which can lead to more positive changes.
- Within this guide and policy conflict also refers to allegations and complaints about the behaviour of individuals.

Conflict Timeline
The way that conflict plays out will be different for different groups and people depending on characters, temperaments and history. However, here are some general stages that a conflict may escalate through:
1) **Discomfort:** A niggle or feeling of annoyance which might start to signal conflict is brewing.
2) **Incident:** First visible minor expression of conflict e.g. a terse exchange.
3) **Misunderstanding:** Escalated to a level of resentments and false assumptions between the parties.
4) **Tension:** Communication breakdown and major arguments / emotional outbursts.
5) **Crisis:** The breaking point.

Often people only start trying to address conflict it its later stages when things have already escalated, and the damage has been done. It is important to recognise the stages and address them sooner rather than later.

The CAG Project Conflict Resolution Policy outlines some principles and procedures the CAG Network can follow to address conflict early on.

2. Conflict Resolution Policy & Principles

In the CAG Oxfordshire Network, we believe that everyone has the right to be treated with consideration, fairness, dignity and respect.

We would not expect anyone working or volunteering within the CAG Oxfordshire Network to encounter harassment, intimidation or victimisation on the basis of gender, race, colour, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation, marital status, religion or belief, age, trade union membership, disability, offending background or any other personal characteristic.

Employees and volunteers within the network have a responsibility to maintain good relationships, a safe working environment and not use words or deeds that may harm the wellbeing of others.

All Network members have a responsibility to address instances of conflict, bullying and harassment themselves where is occurs in their groups or activities and seek to resolve conflict in a positive manner.

The CAG Project can be approached to support groups to resolve conflict and find ways to work together in future to address the reasons for the conflict. The CAG Project is not responsible for investigating and policing groups or solving the problems on the behalf of groups.
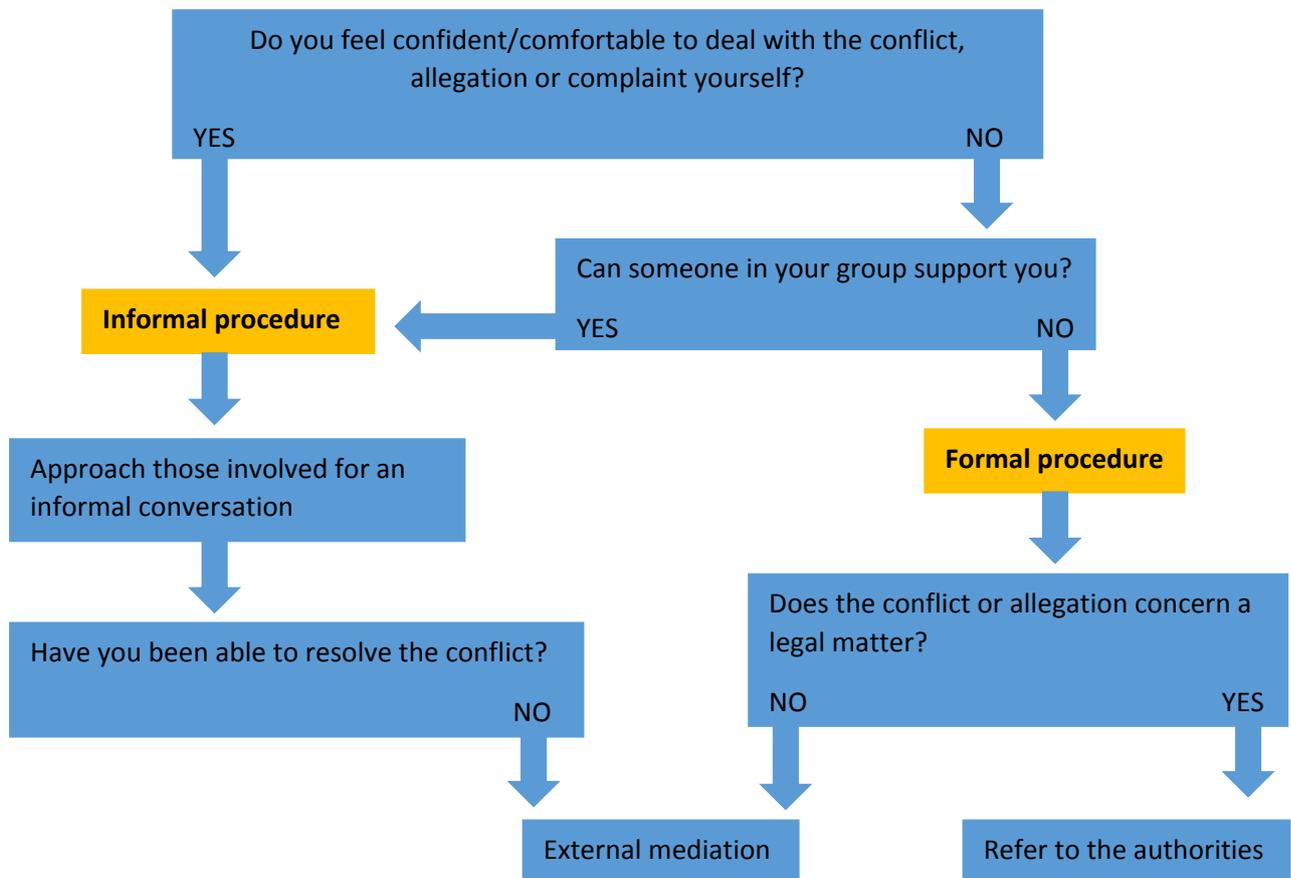
3. Conflict Resolution Procedure
Before Conflict Happens

There are many tools that your groups can use in your day to day meetings and activity to prevent conflict beginning and escalating. Some examples are below and you can check the "Resources" section for more resources and templates:

- **A group agreement:** This can be co-created with your group and it should outline principles for how everyone communicates and behaves towards each other. Part of an agreement should be a shared understanding and procedure about what to do if the agreement is broken.
- **Safer spaces policy:** This is a document which sets out how spaces such as meeting spaces can be made non-threatening or non-discriminatory environments. This might include guidelines on not using prejudicial or offensive language, use of alcohol/drugs and removal of disabling barriers.
- **Comments/Complaint box or inbox:** Not everyone is comfortable raising issues in person, so non-verbal methods can be a useful way to bring sources of conflict to the awareness of the group.
- **Role clarity and structure:** Having really clear role descriptions and equal division of work can help ensure people don't burn-out and that negative power dynamics or hierarchies don't become to dominant.
- **Buddy system:** Pairing up new members of the group with people who have been around longer can be a nice way of welcoming and making people feel comfortable. It is also useful to have another group member you can approach if you have an issue.
- **Check-ins at meetings:** At the start and/or end of a meeting each group takes in in turns to "check in/out" and share how they are feeling. This can help you as a group to pay more attention to each others' well-being and be aware of discomfort or niggles before they escalate.
- **Time to socialise:** Most importantly, your group should enjoy and celebrate each others' company and achievements. Putting time aside to do this can seem hard when things are busy but it will make for a happier and close-knit group in the long run.

A Flowchart for Addressing Conflict

If an individual or group is experiencing a live conflict or has an issue with a person or group or system, here is suggested flow-chart process which you could follow:

Do you feel confident/comfortable to deal with the conflict, allegation or complaint yourself?

YES NO

Can someone in your group support you?

YES NO

Informal procedure

Approach those involved for an informal conversation

Have you been able to resolve the conflict?

NO

Formal procedure

Does the conflict or allegation concern a legal matter?

NO YES

External mediation

Refer to the authorities

Informal Procedure

If you feel able to, you should start by approaching others involved in the conflict, allegation or complaint informally. This could be verbally or in writing and it is usually best to initially involve only those directly concerned either in a 1-2-1 or smaller group before needing to bring it up at a whole group meeting.

If you feel unable to approach those involved alone, you could ask another member of your group or someone you trust to support you. They might help facilitate or attend a meeting with you or approach those involved on your behalf.

During these informal conversations addressing the conflict or allegation, it can be important to think about the follow things:

- **Positive Communication:**
    - Use active listening which means showing with your body language and eye contact that you are listening and not interrupting/giving your own thoughts straight away. People are more likely to hear you if they've been heard!
    - Use open questioning to respond to people and draw out the meaning of what they are saying. Ask open questions which don't shut people down e.g. "How does X make you feel?" Summarising and checking for clarity is also a good technique e.g. "I think that I've heard you say X/it seems that X, is that right?

- o Use non-blaming language to help deescalate and communicate your needs. For example, a blame statement: "You never get to meetings on time. You are so selfish" could be turned into an 'I' statement: "When meetings don't start on time, I feel irritated, because I have a limited amount of time. 'I' statements are structured: "When X happened/you did X" (describe specific objective actions) "I felt" (describe emotion) "because" (describe impact).
  - o Check the "Resources" section below for more resources on positive communication.
- **Understanding needs and finding common ground**: Very often people are not aware that their behaviour is unwelcome or misunderstood. Actions and vocalisations are just strategies for expressing concerns which relate to individual's own motivations and needs. Rather than focusing on the "who said what" stories, try and ask "why?" to find out the underlying needs behind an individual's actions. This can make it easier to find shared needs, common ground and opportunities for understanding and resolution.
- **Be multi-partial**: In a conflict situation there is often an assumption that we must be impartial and judge right and wrong. However, we should acknowledge that we have our own histories, emotions and experiences so there will always be some bias. If you are supporting someone or are helping to facilitate a conflict situation, it is more important, therefore to be multi-partial and try to understand the concerns and needs of everyone involved and have empathy.
- **Keeping records**: It can be useful to keep records of incidents, conversations or meetings. However, these should remain confidential and only be shared with those concerned. Confidential documents should be destroyed once an agreed time has elapsed after the resolution of the conflict.

Formal Procedure

If you don't feel you are able to manage the conflict or allegations within your group through an informal process or the informal process doesn't result in a mutually agreeable resolution you might want to seek external support. You can approach the CAG Project staff or another professional mediator (see the "Resources" section below) to coordinate a more formal conflict resolution procedure.

The CAG Project or other mediator is not responsible for investigating and policing groups or solving the problems on the groups behalf. The role of the mediator is to help the group to discuss the issues and come up with their own solutions, so they can reach a resolution themselves.

If the CAG Project staff are involved in mediating, the process will generally be as follows:
- Take full details of the incidents in writing from all of those involved through a face to face meeting, phone conversation or in writing. All written work by the mediator will be reviewed and approved by the person who's account it was to ensure accuracy.
- It will be necessary that those involved are made aware of any allegations against them and the name(s) of those making the allegations.
- Both parties accounts should be shared with the other, ideally in a forum bringing both parties together face-to-face. The mediator will facilitate a meeting where each party will be given time to express their own accounts and be heard by the other party. Each party will also given opportunities to respond to each other in a positive way which promotes understanding and works towards a collaborative resolution. Ideally the individuals or group will agree on ways to do things differently in the future that address the situational conditions in which the conflict occurred. This may need to take place over several meetings.

- In the event that this is not possible to have a face-to-face meeting, the written accounts may be reviewed by the mediator and a common ground solution may be sought via independent communication with each party.
- Records made by the mediator will be kept confidential and will only be shared with those immediately concerned when necessary. Confidential documents should be destroyed once an agreed time has elapsed after the resolution of the conflict.

Another external mediator appointed by the group may choose to mediate in a different way.

Referring to the Authorities

If the nature of the conflict, allegation or complaint concerns serious misconduct which is illegal (e.g. physical and sexual assault or harassment, a breach of safeguarding toward a child or vulnerable adult, theft, fraud etc.) it should be referred to the relevant authorities by either a member of the group or The CAG Project staff.

Disciplinary Procedures

If your CAG or community group directly employs paid staff members, then you may have or choose to have additional disciplinary procedures in place for misconduct or gross misconduct in the case of behaviour which contravenes the conditions under which they were employed. For advice on formal disciplinary procedures place speak to a CAG Project staff member.

Concerning CAG Project Staff

If the conflict, allegation or complaint is about CAG Project staff member/s, you can contact Resource Futures who will refer this to their internal grievance and disciplinary procedure. You can contact the Resource Futures HR Manager on: info@resourcefutures.co.uk / 0117 930 4355

4. Resources

Further Reading

- **Coalition for Safe Spaces** (Website): https://saferspacesnyc.wordpress.com/
- **Rhizome** – *Introduction to Working With Conflict* (Guide): http://rhizome.coop/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/conflict-intro.pdf
- **Rhizome -** *Practical Steps for a Mediation* (Guide): http://rhizome.coop/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/mediation-practical-steps.pdf
- **Rhizome** – *Introduction to Active Listening* (Guide): http://rhizome.coop/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/active-listening-intro.pdf
- **Rhizome** – *What is Mediation & Reading List* (Guide): https://rhizomenetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/what_is_mediation.pdf
- **Rhizome** – *Principles of Mediation* (Guide): https://rhizomenetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/principles_of_mediation.pdf
- **Rhizome** – *Stages of Mediation* (Guide): https://rhizomenetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/stages_of_mediation.pdf
- **Rhizome** – *A State of Mind for Mediation* (Guide): https://rhizomenetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/a_state_of_mind_for_mediation.pdf
- **Rhizome** – *Mediation Competencies* (Guide): https://rhizomenetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/mediation_competencies.pdf
- **Seeds For Change -** *Working with conflict in our groups* (Guide)**:** https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/conflictbooklet.pdf
- **Seeds For Change -** *A Short Guide to Active Listening* (Guide): https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/activelistening.pdf

- **Seeds For Change -** *A Short Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback* (Guide): https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/feedback.pdf
- **Seeds For Change -** *A Short Guide to Group Agreements* (Guide): https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/groupagree.pdf
- **Seeds For Change -** *A Short Guide to Making Changes in Your Group* (Guide): https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/makingchanges.pdf
- **Transition Network –** *Finding peace within conflict* (Article)**:** https://transitionnetwork.org/do-transition/inner-transition/themes-and-resources/finding-peace-within-conflict/
- **Transition Network –** *Giving a receiving feedback* (Guide)**:** https://transitionnetwork.org/resources/offering-receiving-feedback-guide/

Mediators & Trainers
Navigate (Oxford): https://navigate.org.uk/
Seeds For Change (Lancaster): https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk
Rhizome (UK wide): http://rhizome.coop/

5. More help
If you need any support or advice please contact the CAG Project staff team:
info@cagoxfordshire.org.uk / 07903 037290