

## Can restorative approaches work for social housing officers?

Making things better

**Nigel Whiskin, Director Business Development, Restorative Solutions CIC with thanks to John Stevenson, Head of Anti-social Behaviour at The Places for People Group for inspiring this article and providing the case studies.**

Across the nation housing officers are spending days and days trying to sort out disputes between neighbours; quarrels over parking, noise, kids behaving badly, criminal damage, dog nuisance, unkempt gardens, wheelie bins and so on. It is not uncommon for disputes to drag on for years to the point where the people in the conflict can no longer remember what caused their quarrel in the first place.

The financial and emotional costs are enormous, a drain on the quality of life for all involved - including the housing officers - as well as on budgets.

It is not just housing officers who are dealing with long running disputes. If you add local authority anti-social behaviour and police teams into the equation and the bill for the public purse becomes serious. Take a conflict in North Wales where the police were called to deal with the harassment of two early teen girls by two early teen boys 234 times over 18 months at a cost of over £7,500 in police time alone. Or a social housing estate in Devon where the police were being called 40 times a month to deal with the problems caused by a group of very young lads, swearing, trampling over gardens, breaking fences and terrorising the elderly folk in the neighbourhood.

There are some cases that are so serious that recourse to the law to get tenants evicted, prosecuted for criminal offences or subject to anti-social behaviour orders are unavoidable. But many say that we should only resort to legal sanctions when all other routes to resolving conflicts have been exhausted, tried and failed.

### **Is there is another way that might be worth exploring?**

Based on restorative justice principles a restorative approach to resolving disputes is proving to be an effective tool in helping people involved in conflicts find a way to deal with their problems. The term restorative justice covers a number of different approaches including both direct and indirect mediation. But the approach that is attracting attention by reason of significant results from independent evaluations is called restorative conferencing and involves a face-to-face meeting between those in conflict, the harmed and the harmers, with a trained facilitator to find out what happened, who was harmed and how, and what those involved can do to make things better.

In the North Wales case cited above the incidents were escalating and parents were getting involved along with the school. The police sergeant organised a conference with boys and their parents, and the girls and their parents. The conference took 4.5 hours to organise and deliver at a cost of £157.37p and eighteen months on there has been no repetition of the offensive behaviour.

On the Devon estate where these six young lads were causing trouble, the police beat manager called a conference of the boy's parents and neighbours on a Saturday

afternoon. It was a very fiery meeting until one of the dads agreed that the situation could not continue, handed out his contact details and said if his boy caused any problem he would come and deal with it. Other parents followed suit and eighteen months on NO CALLS to the police for assistance on the estate. The conference took a day and half of police time to organise costing about £450, a saving of £1,300 a month.

### **So could this powerful tool work for social housing officers?**

We are indebted to John Stevenson, Head of Anti-social Behaviour at The Places for People for providing the case reports outlined below written by the Housing Officers in his team. John is a passionate advocate of restorative approaches and is implementing restorative approaches across The Places for People Group.

#### **Case Report October 2008**

*A dispute between next door neighbours, Tracey and Paul, began in April 2008, principally about the use of children's trampolines. Tracey alleged that her neighbour's children, aged 6 and 7, had broken her child's trampoline and caused a nuisance by deliberately jumping up and down on their trampoline to look into her windows.*

*What complicated matters were that Tracey's husband had died suddenly in late 2007 and that her son suffered ADHD. Paul alleged that Tracey's son had bullied his children and stated that Tracey had a "bad attitude".*

*Although the incidents were relatively low level the dispute was clearly becoming a big issue. The ASB Housing Officer who facilitated the conference discussed all matters in preparation and Tracey was content that her circumstances could be talked about at the meeting.*

*When the conference took place, it was clear that Paul was not aware of Tracey's recent bereavement and this had a real impact upon him. The loss of Tracey's husband had also had an adverse effect on her son's medical condition. It also became clear that the problems were mainly to do with the children falling out with each other.*

*An outcome agreement was agreed as follows:*

- Tracey agreed to move her trampoline away from the party fence and turn it around to allow access from a different angle as her son had caused some damage to the party fence when using the trampoline. Tracey agreed to repair the fence and promised to stop her son from causing any further damage.*
- Paul agreed to relocate his trampoline so that it did not overlook Tracey's window. This was to be done jointly by Tracey and Paul.*
- All agreed that greater tolerance was needed and accepted that much of the issue was do with the age of the children. Paul agreed to ensure that his children behaved and stopped winding up Tracey's son.*

The case report outlined above shows how the conference process works. Both:

- Parties agreed voluntarily to attend the conference and were briefed about what to expect by the facilitator beforehand
- Were asked about what happened and how they were harmed

- Worked on finding THEIR solution to the dispute and recorded it in the outcome agreement

### **Case Report 2 August 2008**

*A dispute between two elderly couples living next door to each other had been rumbling on for over two years, generating a mountain of complaints about the gardens, a loud grandfather clock and the glare of an ornamental lamp post in one of the couple's gardens – 'a classic'.*

*Complaints had escalated into allegations of abusive language and minor threats. The usual ASB approach had made little impact on the conflict and so a restorative meeting was tried.*

*The conference lasted for about two hours and for the first 45 minutes the atmosphere was fractious with name calling and allegations old and new being made by all the parties. Once the mood settled down it was possible to explore the issues and establish what harm was being caused.*

*During the meeting it came to light that one couple had lost their daughter during 2007 and the mother had subsequently been on medication that made her volatile.*

*Her neighbour had started to lose her hair through stress and was also on medication. Inevitably the conflict was having implications for the health of both parties.*

*All began to talk about the future and agreed to look forward instead of back and this led to an outcome agreement as follows:*

- *That the clear lamp post panels in the garden be painted black to prevent glare and in turn the neighbour would relocate their gazebo and avoid obstructing the view from the neighbours' garden.*
- *Both parties would discuss the relocating of the grandfather clock and adjusting the volume level to avoid disturbing the neighbours.*
- *One couple agreed to move an unsightly overgrown shrub from their garden which had caused a nuisance to the neighbours in the autumn when it had lost its leaves.*

*As the outcome agreement was being written up by the facilitator both couples began to talk between themselves over a cup of tea and a biscuit.*

The case report touches on three important issues:

- The health of two of the parties may have been harmed and certainly was not helped by the dispute. Research in the criminal justice system shows that crime victims are able to get on with their lives more quickly after a restorative conference.
- At the end of the conference the parties began talking, a process that we describe as re-integration, vital if the accord reached at the conference is to be sustained.
- In the modern world how little we know about the issues with which our neighbours – and our colleagues for that matter – are contending.

### **Case Report 3 May 2009**

*The case involved three tenants who live on a general let scheme and who live in adjoining terraced properties. All parties have children and two tenants were complaining about the tenant who lived between them. The complaints had gone on for 18 months and central to the problem was the 20 year old daughter of the middle tenant who whilst not living at the house visited her mother regularly and played loud music, held late night parties and was abusive to the other two tenants and their families. Matters escalated and got to the point where the partner of one of the tenants was arrested for common assault against the daughter.*

*The three parties were clearly stressed out by the situation so it was decided to make progress by getting all parties together for a restorative conference.*

*It was clear from the start that the three parties wanted to move on with their lives and were open and honest in speaking their minds and expressing how they felt about the problems that had developed – this discussion would not have happened without the conference as they would not have instigated such a conversation themselves. It also came out of the meeting that the children from the respective families had been stopped from playing with each other due to the feud, which made the parties realise they needed to find ways to live together. It was apparent that the 20 year old daughter when drunk behaves in a very anti-social and abusive manner. One of the neighbours said she was responsible for 80% of the problem and that they actually felt sorry for her mother.*

*The following outcome agreement was reached:*

- *Should the daughter be drunk when visiting she will not be allowed entry to her mother's house. If she becomes either drunk or causes a nuisance or annoyance whilst inside the property she will be asked to leave immediately.*
- *All parties to be courteous to each other.*

Is it not worrying how relatively minor incidents when allowed to gain momentum start to impact on the lives of several families including children? The question to ask is with these cases is 'what would have been the outcome if a restorative conference had been held after say, three reports of problems rather than one or two years of persistent trouble?'

All the cases referred to, including those handled by the police, are not about events that will cause the start of an international conflict but all have a massive impact on the well being of local people, on community cohesion and safety and on inter-personal and communal relationships. When all is said and done, community living is all about people getting on with each other, respecting individual values, space and privacy.

### **So what is needed to make Restorative Approaches work for you?**

- You must have top management informed support and commitment, who can see the human, social and economic benefits of introducing restorative approaches into your front line work
- Awareness and implementation training for middle managers – nothing changes without middle management involvement at a cost of about £70 per head for 15 people (one day course)
- Training in conference facilitation for housing officers at a cost of about £200 per head for 8 people (2 day course)

- Reliable management information systems in place to capture and report on outcomes.

No new practice works without strong leadership and effective middle management, managers asking the questions about every case that is calling for help three or four times a month.

### **What differences using restorative approaches will make to your work?**

- High levels of tenant satisfaction with the restorative process – in the 90% range
- Dramatic reductions in repeat call outs and complaints in 65% of cases
- Take up of the offer of a restorative conference in the order of 70%
- Job satisfaction for social housing officers greatly enhanced

### **Where does resistance to use restorative conferencing come from?**

We think some professionals are:

- Reluctant to work in different ways and hand over problem solving to the people directly involved.
- Worried about the risks of handling highly emotionally charged conflicts
- Set in their working ways
- Claiming they are 'doing it already' when they are not!

We say it is time to seriously consider introducing into restorative conferencing into your work, remembering the case that one social housing provider took to the courts to get an eviction. The case was rejected and it cost the social housing landlord £35k in legal costs, let alone ill will and reputational damage; and of course the landlord was still left with a serious ongoing problem. A few weeks later an experienced restorative conferencing facilitator was engaged to work on the problem. Less than two days later at a cost of £1,200 the case was resolved.

Common sense? Yes we think so. So we say build in the organisational capacity to use the powerful restorative conferencing tool.

### **About Restorative Solutions CIC**

Restorative Solutions is a community interest company working on a not-for-profit basis. Our mission is to develop and promote the use of Restorative Approaches as an effective method for dealing with conflicts and disputes in neighbourhoods, schools and other communities.

We work directly with agencies that tackle inappropriate behavior, harm and people in dispute in schools, neighbourhood police teams, anti-social behaviour teams, prolific and persistent offender projects, youth offending teams, social housing providers, residential care homes, and more.

We offer training courses aimed at helping organisations use the powerful and effective restorative tools into their daily activities.

All our training is delivered by experienced Restorative Practitioners and all our courses are tailored for the organisations that we are training and supported by a practitioners manual.

For more information contact:  
Gary Stephenson on 07505 128 568

E: [gary.stephenson@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:gary.stephenson@blueyonder.co.uk)

[www.restorativesolutions.org.uk](http://www.restorativesolutions.org.uk)

**2.350 words app**