



Portsmouth Mediation Service Annual Report 2025/26

Trustees' Report year ending March 2026

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The Trustees present their report and accounts for the year ending 31st March 2026.

Structure, Governance and Management

The charity is a company limited by guarantee.

The Trustees, who are also the directors for the purpose of company law and who served during the year were:

Fiona Armstrong (resigned June 2025)

Philip Winchester (appointed December 2018)

Alan Davis (appointed November 2019)

Paul Hutchings (appointed January 2022)

Wendy May Jacobs (appointed January 2023)

Lisa Wills (appointed March 2025)

Greg Mann (appointed March 2026)

Trustees are recruited from interested individuals, volunteer mediators and representatives of the community. None of the trustees has any beneficial interest in the company. All the trustees are members of the company and guarantee to contribute a sum not exceeding £10 for payment of the company's debts and liabilities in the event of winding up.

The trustees have paid due regard to guidance issued by the Charity Commission in deciding what activities the charity should undertake. The charity is managed by the trustees who exercise all the powers of the charity. For the past year, the day-to-day operation of the charity has again been carried out by the Service Manager who reports to the trustees. All policies and strategies are decided by the trustees sitting as a group on a regular basis.

The Portsmouth Mediation Service (PMS) operates for the benefit of residents in Portsmouth and for the benefit of social housing residents in the wider Portsmouth area. A substantial proportion of the work of PMS is with Portsmouth City Council.

The trustees have assessed and continue to assess the major risks to which the charity is exposed and are satisfied that systems are in place to mitigate exposure to major risks.

Public Benefit

The trustees confirm that they have referred to the guidance contained in the Charity Commission's general guidance on public benefits when reviewing the charity's aims and in planning future activities. The trustees refer to public benefit throughout this report.

Vision

PMS aims to operate as a 'Centre of Excellence and Influence' in seeing Portsmouth established as a Restorative City.

Mission

Through a journey of assessment, mediation, and restorative practice, we will partner with other envisioned people and organisations to help seek the peace and prosperity of a 'Restorative Portsmouth'.

Charitable Activities Achievement and Performance

As Chair of Portsmouth Mediation Service, it's a privilege to share an overview from the trustees of our activities over the past year. This has been a year of consolidation and growing external recognition, with our efforts focused on maintaining a strong organisational foundation while extending the reach and influence of restorative practice across Portsmouth and the wider region. Trustees have remained focused on supporting high quality service delivery, sustaining financial stability, and strengthening partnerships, while responding to a changing external environment affecting referral patterns and funding structures.

Strategic Planning and Governance

The trustees continued to work within the strategic framework agreed in the previous year, shaped around the four pillars of our strategic vision: Finance & Operational Stability; Partnerships; Widening Our Impact; and Training, Development, Health & Wellbeing. This framework has provided a clear and consistent foundation for governance, planning, and priority setting throughout the year.

Trustees received regular and detailed service manager reports, enabling effective oversight of performance, staffing, financial position, risks, and opportunities. Our restorative approach to governance continues to inform the way trustees engage with strategy, challenge, and collective responsibility, strengthening both decision making and trustee cohesion.

Service Delivery and Staff Development

Throughout the year, Portsmouth Mediation Service continued to deliver a wide range of mediation, assessment, restorative and training services in response to conflict affecting individuals, families and communities. Our Assessment Service remained a core operational activity and a significant contributor to income, despite fluctuations in referral levels linked to structural changes within partner organisations.

During the year staffing changes were managed carefully, with trustees supporting a flexible and proportionate approach to deployment and costs, while maintaining service continuity and capacity. Trustees remain grateful for the commitment and adaptability shown by staff and self-employed practitioners during this period. Our regional work through the Solent Restorative Partnership continued to develop positively, with growing volunteer engagement, training delivery, and networking activity in Winchester and surrounding areas, strengthening our presence beyond Portsmouth.

Financial Stability and Sustainability

The trustees are pleased to report that the charity remained financially stable throughout the year, maintaining reserves at appropriate levels and managing expenditure prudently. While some income streams experienced short term pressure due to external factors, these were balanced by earned income from training, contract income, and grant funded activity.

The charity continues to be funded through a mix of contracts, grants, and earned income, supporting both resilience and independence. Trustees have continued to monitor financial risk, particularly in relation to contract dependency and upcoming tender cycles and are confident that the organisation is well positioned to manage future challenges.

Training and Development

Training remained a key area of activity during the year, generating income while embedding restorative skills and values across communities and partner organisations. The charity delivered further community mediation training Programmes, along with bespoke restorative and mediation training for external partners. Trustees recognise training as both a core charitable activity and a strategic investment in long-term impact. The continued development of training resources, including online and blended approaches, supports the organisation's aim to widen access to restorative learning while maintaining quality and consistency.

Community Partnerships and Impact

Partnership working continued to be central to the charity's impact. Portsmouth Mediation Service maintained strong collaborative relationships with local authorities, housing providers, police services, NHS partners, the University of Portsmouth, and a wide range of voluntary and community organisations.

The charity continued to play a leading role in the Waterfront Restorative Approaches Partnership (WRAP), supporting youth engagement, community safety, and preventative approaches to conflict. Collaborative research and learning initiatives, including work arising from the Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR) project, have further strengthened the organisation's profile and evidence base.

Looking Forward

As we move into 2026–27, the trustees remain firmly committed to our vision of promoting restorative approaches as a foundation for healthier, more connected communities. Key areas of focus include preparing for future contract renewals, strengthening partnerships within housing, health and education, and continuing to embed learning from research and evaluation into practice. The trustees are confident that the charity's strong values, skilled team, and trusted partnerships provide a solid platform for continued development and impact, while maintaining the high quality, relational approach that defines PMS.

Acknowledgements

The trustees would like to acknowledge and thank the dedication and professionalism of Steve Rolls, Service Manager, together with the staff team, volunteers, partners, and supporters of Portsmouth Mediation Service. Their commitment continues to make a meaningful difference in the lives of individuals and communities affected by conflict.

Our collective efforts over the past year have strengthened both the organisation and its impact. With a stable financial position, a clear strategic framework, and a strong network of partnerships, Portsmouth Mediation Service is well placed to continue advancing restorative practice across Portsmouth and beyond.

As we look ahead, we remain confident that our shared vision and values will continue to guide our work and support positive change in our communities.

Paul Hutchings

Chair of the Board of Trustees

On behalf of the Board of Trustees



Gossiping The Restorative Message

At Portsmouth Mediation Service (PMS), we often remind ourselves that by the time mediation is needed, relationships have usually reached a point of significant difficulty. That is precisely why we remain committed to our city-wide restorative vision and mission. Our ambition has never been simply to resolve conflict, it is to help prevent it by creating stronger, healthier relationships across our communities.

As PMS celebrates its 30th Anniversary this year, we have the privilege of reflecting on three decades of service to Portsmouth. For more than a third of that time, we have operated with what we describe as our restorative USP. While our services have evolved, our conviction has remained unchanged: the answer to many of society's greatest challenges is restorative.

We are passionate about keeping the word *restorative* at the forefront of everything we do. It represents far more than another project, programme or passing trend. Restorative is a living philosophy—a practical and hopeful way of doing life together. It is an approach that places relationships at the heart of communities and seeks to repair harm, build understanding and create lasting change.

Along the way we regularly meet well-intentioned people who suggest replacing the word with something more fashionable or contemporary. At PMS, however, we continue to champion and "gossip" the restorative message wherever we go. We see restorative as the umbrella under which many other excellent practices and approaches naturally sit.

More recently we have embraced the broader language of *Relational and Restorative Practice*, although, as someone wisely observed to me, not every relationship is healthy. It is the restorative element that gives relationships their purpose, direction and strength. Whether people fully understand the terminology or not, the word *restorative* carries positive associations. Dictionary definitions consistently speak of renewal, healing, repair and restoration. It is an optimistic word – and optimism is something our communities need.

Three simple restorative principles continue to guide our work. Firstly, restorative practice is about taking the time to understand one another. It is remarkably difficult to remain in conflict with someone whose story you genuinely understand.

Secondly, it is about keeping people connected to their families and communities. Experience consistently shows that when people are excluded, isolated or cast aside, outcomes often deteriorate. Belonging creates accountability, hope and opportunity.

Thirdly, restorative practice is about togetherness. Collaboration replaces competition, and shared purpose overcomes rivalry. The strongest teams are not made up of individuals hoping their teammates fail so they can take their place. They succeed because every member is committed to the success of the whole. The same principle applies in our communities.

At PMS we are striving to live out these principles ourselves. Rather than seeing neighbouring organisations as competitors, we are intentionally building stronger partnerships across Hampshire. Working alongside New Forest and Southampton Mediation, we are helping to develop the Solent Restorative Partnership (SRP), creating a stronger collective voice and extending the reach of restorative practice across our region. You can read more about these exciting developments elsewhere in this report.

There is an old saying that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." It remains as relevant today as ever. Too often, division prevents us from achieving our shared potential. Restorative practice offers a different path – one that values listening before judging, understanding before reacting, and collaboration before confrontation.

Of course, living restoratively is not always easy. None of us are naturally wired to respond this way. It takes intentional effort to listen when we would rather speak, to offer another chance when someone has let us down, and to place the good of the wider community ahead of our own ambitions. Yet when we choose this path, we begin to experience the remarkable strength that comes through unity and community.

As we continue this journey together, I want to encourage us all to keep **restorative justice, restorative practice and restorative approaches** firmly at the centre of our conversations. Restorative is the solid table upon which many other valuable approaches sit, whether trauma-informed practice, mediation, the Compass of Shame, or other tools that help people flourish.

This year is especially significant. As Portsmouth celebrates 100 years of city status, Portsmouth Mediation Service proudly marks its own 30th Anniversary. When I first joined PMS, I read through our founding constitutional documents I noted that the charity *existed predominantly for the benefit of the people of Portsmouth*. Three decades later, that commitment remains as strong as ever.

A 30th anniversary is traditionally known as a Pearl Anniversary. Pearls symbolise wisdom, endurance and integrity - qualities that seem fitting for a charity that has faithfully served its city for three decades. We are excited about what lies ahead. We look forward to celebrating together at this year's AGM, and later in the autumn we will host a city-wide community celebration. As part of Portsmouth 100, we are also collecting 100 Restorative Stories, real examples of hope, reconciliation and positive change. If you have a story to share, we would love to hear from you.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to our partners, supporters and friends. We are continually encouraged by the growing network of restorative champions and ambassadors who are bringing hope into difficult situations and helping to build stronger, safer and more connected communities through positive relationships. Together, we truly are stronger.

My sincere thanks also go to our outstanding team, whose dedication and compassion inspire me every day as they continue to go the extra mile on the restorative road. I am equally grateful to our committed Trustees, and to those who have recently expressed an interest in joining the PMS Board of Directors. We look forward to formally welcoming you soon.

Steve Rolls
Manager



Beyond The Cases

Here Lili Boyanova Hugh, Restorative Practitioner and Spearhead of the Solent Restorative Partnership, reflects on the new partnership's journey.

When I first became involved with the Solent Restorative Partnership, I naturally thought a lot about mediation, restorative conversations and helping people resolve conflict. Those things remain at the heart of what we do, but over the past year my own thinking has quietly shifted.

I've found myself becoming less interested in individual interventions alone and more interested in what happens when people who genuinely care about their communities begin to connect with one another.



One of the greatest privileges this year has been meeting people from education, policing, health, local charities, businesses and community groups who all seem to be asking similar questions. How do we create communities

where people feel they belong? How do we respond to conflict with compassion rather than judgement? How do we strengthen relationships before they reach breaking point? One of my biggest lessons has been that no single organisation can answer those questions alone.

Conflict, trauma, loneliness and poor wellbeing don't fit neatly within organisational boundaries, so neither should our response. The more time I spend bringing people together across different sectors, the more convinced I become that lasting change grows through partnership, curiosity and shared learning.

This year we hosted our first Trauma Awareness event, bringing together professionals from health, education and community services to explore how trauma shapes the way people experience relationships, conflict and connection. I was struck by how often difficult behaviour begins as an adaptive response to difficult experiences. The more we understand this, the better equipped we become to respond with empathy while still holding healthy boundaries. For me, trauma awareness strengthens the very foundations on which trust, relationships and restorative practice are built.

Building on that conversation, during Mental Health Awareness Week we welcomed people from across the region to explore wellbeing, emotional resilience, nutrition and practical self-regulation. These were conversations about what helps people thrive, not simply wellbeing sessions. When we understand ourselves better, regulate our emotions more effectively and feel supported by those around us, we are far more able to listen well, navigate disagreement and repair relationships when things go wrong. Healthy relationships don't begin when conflict appears; they begin long before, in the everyday ways we care for ourselves and one another.

Perhaps that has been my biggest realisation this year. We tend to think of restorative practice as something we offer once relationships have broken down. It matters just as much beforehand, in creating the conditions where stronger relationships, healthier organisations and more connected communities can grow in the first place. We're still at the beginning of this journey, and there is much we don't yet know. But every conversation, every partnership and every event reminds me that many people share this hope. It is both humbling and encouraging to see a growing network of individuals and organisations choosing to learn together, support one another, and contribute to something bigger than any one of us could achieve alone.



Pictured here at The Trauma Informed event left to right with The Mayor of Winchester is Mike, Lili, Debs and Gaby

Lili Boyanova Hugh



The Solent Restorative Partnership is a trading style of Portsmouth Mediation Service (registered charity no 1061569) (registered company no 3258327) who is the controller for the purposes of Data Protection.

Research Journey Continues with Wessex Health Partners

We are Nadiya and Laura, and we began our research journey with Portsmouth Mediation Service (PMS) and the NHS in September 2024.

Funded by NHS England, the Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR) Programme supports voluntary sector organisations to tackle health inequalities by recruiting, training and mentoring local researchers to carry out community-led research and share their findings with decision-makers.

As part of the programme, we received training in research methods and data analysis from the University of Reading and the Scottish Community Development Centre.

Our research explored a simple but important question: **"Is conflict a health inequality?"** For many people, conflict is a constant and normalised part of everyday life. Yet the stress, anxiety and relationship breakdown it causes can have a profound impact on both mental and physical health.



Using interviews, surveys, a creative writing workshop and a focus group, we gathered a wide range of community perspectives. Our findings confirmed our initial suspicions, but the scale and severity of the health impacts were even greater than we had anticipated. Many participants shared deeply moving and often heartbreaking personal experiences that highlighted the significant human cost of unresolved conflict.

In September 2025, we presented our findings in London to fellow community researchers and national stakeholders. Although we were naturally nervous, we were also excited to share what we had learned. The response was

overwhelmingly positive. There was genuine interest in our research, not only because it explores a relatively new area of inquiry, but because conflict is something that affects us all. Since then, we have continued to share our findings across Portsmouth and beyond.

One of the key recommendations from our research was the development of **Restorative Community Learning**. Wanting to explore this concept further, we partnered with the Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) Portsmouth, the University of Portsmouth and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Board to develop a community-inspired model for restorative learning. Together, we successfully secured funding from Wessex Health Partners to continue this work.

Through three focus groups held within existing community settings, we gained rich insights into what effective Community Learning Spaces should look and feel like. Our latest research report will be available on the PMS website shortly. Participants consistently told us that these spaces need to place relationships at their heart. Personal invitations, a warm welcome, opportunities to share food and drink, and the absence of rigid agendas were all identified as essential ingredients in creating environments where people feel safe, valued and able to connect.

Conflict avoidance and self-reflection also emerged as recurring themes, highlighting important areas for future research.

Perhaps our greatest insight has been people's willingness to come together, sit in circles and talk openly. Participants shared honest and often painful life experiences that fostered empathy, understanding and connection. Once again, we witnessed the power of restorative community learning circles in action and the positive impact they can have on individual wellbeing and community relationships.

We believe this approach has enormous potential to improve health, strengthen communities and transform the way people experience and respond to conflict. Our ambition is to see restorative community learning flourish across Portsmouth and, ultimately, much further afield.

As a first step towards making this vision a reality, we have applied for funding through the National Lottery Community Fund's **Awards for All** programme to establish a **Restorative Hub Community Leader**. Based in the heart of Portsmouth, the Hub would offer an open drop-in service where people experiencing conflict could talk through their situation and explore appropriate support, including restorative meetings, restorative training and restorative community learning circles.

Alongside this, we continue to seek further funding and partnerships to help bring this vision to life.

If you are interested in our research, have questions, or would like to be involved in developing this work, we would love to hear from you.



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Restorative Residences become the Hallmark

Some things roll around every year like clockwork: year-end accounts, car tax, MOT, insurance – and the PMS article for the AGM magazine. They all share one trait: I tend to leave them until the last possible moment. This year is no different. I'm at my computer with a note from Steve asking for a piece about our work with the University of Portsmouth.

Unlike tax and MOTs, our university work is energising and deeply satisfying. It isn't compulsory, not a regulatory obligation, and not in anyone's job description. Like much of PMS's work, it's something we carry in our hearts – part of the "Restorative City" vision that shapes who we are. Vision can either propel you forward or remind you how far you still must travel. It's a bit like having children in the back seat on a long drive: "Are we there yet?" "I'm bored!" I still recall the thrill when we first began working with a handful of law students and launched the "Sort It Out" Programme. We had no idea then that it would be the start of a long, sometimes challenging, but ultimately rewarding journey.

On long drives I enjoy the motorway – making steady progress. In practice, though, you often have to take B-roads, country lanes or move at the speed of the traffic around you. So, it has been with our partnership at the University. Progress involved many twists and turns; we must often match the pace of our partners. Travelling together, however, is safer and more rewarding – and sooner or later you reach that clear A-road where you can pick up speed. It feels like we've reached that point in several parts of university life. In this article, I want to highlight two of them.



Student Success Advisors

Six months ago, I began some work with Sue Knight, one of the Restorative City/University champions, with staff in a relatively new role: Student Success Advisors (SSAs). Our brief was simple – equip them with practical, empowering skills to support students. We agreed to meet monthly for six months, offering two alternate sessions each month to fit busy diaries. We didn't arrive with a detailed plan, but we did have a clear vision. By applying restorative methods – **Restorative Circles** and working in the **"with" sector** of the Social Discipline Window – we committed to

travelling at the pace set by the SSAs. We accepted detours and often went off the expected track. On the first session only three people turned up, far fewer than we'd hoped. Yet by the end of that two- hour session they were impressed and found the content helpful. They became advocates within their colleges, and attendance grew steadily. June marked the final month of the initial Programme. As the saying goes, "all good things must come to an end" – but at PMS we prefer, "all good things can grow into something bigger." The SSAs asked to continue. One email from the team captures their feeling:

"I speak for many of the wider SSA team: the practice has been very informative and the unique, effective collaboration of both Sue and John has helped us have more meaningful conversations and better understand our students. While we recognise financial constraints, any help to continue this would be greatly appreciated."

As a result, we've scheduled a further 12- month Programme starting in September. Sue won't be able to join consistently because of other commitments, though she'll drop in when she can. Working with one part of the university for 18 months could create a ripple effect across other departments. It certainly feels like we're on a faster dual carriageway.

Student Halls of Residence

The emotional strain of leaving home for university is well documented. Students lose previous support networks and move into compact communities where cultural norms vary. Even with strong institutional support, students can feel isolated. The Restorative City vision aims to equip as many students as possible with the skills to handle those pressures. For several years I've believed the best opportunity is at the point of entry: training new halls intakes (roughly 3,000 – 3,500 students). It would be impossible for PMS alone to reach that number, so over the past year we formed a sub- group of university staff empowered to think creatively.

From one particularly productive meeting we developed a five- point strategy: train ResLife staff; they train ResLife ambassadors; ambassadors then train and support the incoming students. The Programme runs July – September and includes ongoing monitoring, evaluation and improvement so it can be repeated each year. This initiative, too, feels like moving into the fast lane.

Our partnership with the University of Portsmouth began modestly and has grown through patient, collaborative work. We've learned to accept twists in the road and to match the pace of our partners. Now, with expanded SSA sessions and a scalable halls- based model, it feels like we're finally on those clearer, faster stretches of the journey – moving the Restorative City vision from hopeful idea toward lasting practice.

John Swindell
PMS Restorative Consultant & Trainer



Portsmouth Mediation Service 30 Year Anniversary

In the Year the great city of Portsmouth celebrates its 100th Anniversary, we are delighted to be marking our own 30th Birthday! we are thankful to those who have gone before us and grateful for our present team who continue to seek the Peace & Prosperity of a Restorative Portsmouth.

Here is a selection of pictures that capture some of our past story







Above: PMS 20th Anniversary Celebration 2016



Above: Our iconic Christmas Card Picture from 2019



Left: The PMS 25th Anniversary Conference

Below: The Sort it Out Team from 2018



PMS Team Building Day In The Forest. 2016



Treasurer's Report

An independent inspection of our accounts has been conducted by Morris Crocker Accountants. Please refer to the separate 'Report of the Trustees and Unaudited Financial Statements' document for full information.

From a financial perspective, there are non-trustee interests, and none benefit from the service.

The Board of Trustees has continued to maintain oversight of financial matters of PMS through their bi-monthly meeting. Financial matters are a standing agenda item, where a review of day to day running and projection of longer-term financial issues are discussed. This includes ensuring that monies held are sufficient to uphold the service's reserves policy, namely that non-designated funds are maintained at a level of between three- and six-months expenditure.

Xero Accounting software has been embedded within the charity's financial system. This year, attention has been focussed on where expenditure and income on individual projects has been used, to ensure that they remain financially viable.

Whilst it is only a 'snapshot', of finances on a particular day, at the end of the financial year of 31st March 2026, monies held in our current account was over £33,000 (compared against a figure of £26,000 in March 2025).

A further £65,000 was held in our savings account (against a figure of £56,000 in March 2025). Of the savings, £18,000 is identified for specific projects, whilst the remaining £47,000 is general savings and reserves for PMS.

	2026	2025	2024	2023	2022
Turnover	223,474	209,118	229,975	183,626	141,455
Expenditure	202,687	214,324	207,507	169,822	136,433
Net Income	20,787	(5,206)	22,468	13,804	5,022

Phil Winchester
Trustee & Treasurer



PMS Family Mediation – Expanding Service & Support

Strategic Growth and Achievements

Since 2021, the PMS Family Mediation Service has made significant strides in professionalizing and expanding its reach. Key milestones include:

- **Professional Accreditation:** Transitioning the service to be fully delivered by Family Mediation Council (FMC) accredited mediators.
- **National Affiliation:** Becoming an official affiliate of National Family Mediation (NFM).
- **Legal Aid Delivery:** Working within the NFM legal aid contract to offer fully funded, legally aided mediation to eligible clients.

We were also pleased to hear that the Government renewed the voucher scheme for a further year, offering families up to £500 towards joint mediation when discussing child arrangements. Over the past year, we have sustained this growth while firmly embedding a restorative approach at the core of our service delivery.

Impact and Client Volume

Demand for our services continues to rise year-on-year. We now handle an average of over **320 inquiries annually**, which includes a notable number of returning clients. Since our inception in 2021, we have proudly supported over **665 families** through the mediation process.

Partnerships and Community Engagement

We continue to strengthen our collaborative relationships with the **Portsmouth Family Hubs** and **STOP Domestic Abuse**, ensuring that mediation is only delivered when it is safe and appropriate to do so. This year, we integrated the FMC's newly developed Domestic Abuse Toolkit into our practice, further enhancing our safeguarding protocols.

In early 2026, we delivered a presentation to Portsmouth headteachers to highlight how early-stage mediation enhances a child's well-being by reducing domestic conflict. Our overarching objective is to improve children's educational experiences – specifically boosting attendance, well-being, and academic attainment across Portsmouth schools – by addressing conflict away from the school environment at the earliest opportunity. We would also like to extend our thanks to Stephen Morgan for his support in amplifying this vital message.



Future Outlook and Recruitment

Our ongoing objective is to proactively engage with as many local agencies as possible. By promoting the benefits of mediation early, we can successfully prevent family conflicts from escalating.

Our delivery team remains comprised of **Chloe Evans** (left) and **Lynn Jackson**. Moving forward, we warmly welcome inquiries from qualified family mediators or individuals interested in entering the profession. Opportunities are available to assist with voluntary administration, with a clear pathway toward case observations and formal family mediation training.

Administrative Management

Family mediation requires a substantial administrative framework to process inquiries and manage active cases. This administrative demand is particularly high for legal aid cases, which are subject to rigorous audits by the Legal Aid Agency. To ensure our practitioners can focus on core mediation work without becoming overwhelmed, we constantly review and streamline our operational processes.

Chloe Evans
PMS Family Mediator

Mediation Service Connections

One of the ways we stay up to date with new mediation ideas and practices is to build good relationships with other regional providers and service's and in true restorative fashion that means regular face to face meeting over some food!



Pictured here left to right at our lunch meeting in Old Portsmouth is Alice the CEO of Mediation Plus who cover East & West Sussex. Anthea the CEO of Alternatives to Conflict (formerly Mediation Bucks) who serve communities in Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire & Berkshire. Mandy from Mediation Surrey and Phyllida who is Chair of Trustee for Alternatives to Conflict.

PMS Assessment Work – A Neighbour Dispute Case Study

A core element of our Restorative Service is our Assessment contact with Portsmouth City Council Housing where we support and help neighbours to repair harm and hurt when conflict and disputes break out. Here our Katie provides a recent story.

Background

A referral was received regarding an ongoing neighbour dispute between two households living in a block of flats. The complainant was a mother living alone with her four children, aged between 5 and 13 years old. The family had relocated from London following serious domestic abuse and were attempting to rebuild their lives in a new area. The mother's former partner had recently been released from prison, and she remained fearful for her family's safety and anxious about maintaining her privacy.

The neighbouring household consisted of a couple and an older family member who had lived in the property for several years. One resident worked night shifts while another started work early in the morning, making uninterrupted sleep particularly important for the household.

The Issues

The downstairs residents reported regular disturbance from noise coming from the flat above, particularly during late evening and early morning hours. They described hearing footsteps, children running, kitchen activity, and what they believed to be cooking noises between midnight and 3am. On several occasions they reported hearing sounds such as chopping, pans being moved, blending, and a washing machine being used during the night.

Frustrated by the ongoing disruption and the impact on their sleep, the downstairs resident had attempted to speak directly with his neighbour. When he received no response, he shouted outside the block and tried to gain access to the building to discuss the issue. While he viewed this as an attempt to resolve the problem, his actions were perceived very differently by the family upstairs.

For the mother and her children, the shouting and attempts to enter the block triggered significant anxiety. Having fled domestic abuse and violence, they were highly sensitive to confrontation and perceived aggressive behaviour. The family reported feeling frightened in their own home and living in a constant state of alertness.

The situation was further complicated by misunderstandings. The upstairs resident disputed many of the allegations regarding late-night cooking and appliance use. She explained that some noises may have been caused by children using the bathroom, a family cat moving around the kitchen at night, or occasional unavoidable household activity. She also noted the challenges of raising four children alone and managing a busy family home.

Challenges Faced

This case highlighted several barriers commonly seen in neighbour disputes:

- Different perceptions of what constituted unreasonable noise.
- The impact of trauma and past experiences on how behaviour is interpreted.
- A lack of direct communication between neighbours.
- Cultural and personal sensitivities.

- Family circumstances, including caring responsibilities and shift work.
- Escalating frustration leading to actions that were perceived as threatening.
- Social isolation and lack of support networks.

Importantly, both parties felt unheard and misunderstood. While one household was struggling with disrupted sleep, the other was coping with the ongoing effects of trauma and fear.

Mediation Approach

Separate conversations were held with both households to fully understand their experiences and concerns. The mother was able to explain the background to her family's relocation, the impact of previous domestic abuse, and why attempts to approach her home caused such distress. She was also willing to consider practical solutions to reduce noise, including fitting soft-close pads to drawers, carpeting one room, closing the kitchen door at night to prevent the cat from entering, and making efforts to avoid noise after midnight.

The downstairs resident was given greater insight into his neighbour's circumstances. Understanding the context behind her anxiety helped him recognise how his actions had been perceived. He expressed regret that his behaviour had caused fear and clarified that his intention had been to address the noise issue rather than intimidate his neighbour.

Positive Outcomes

As communication improved, both parties demonstrated a willingness to compromise. The mother agreed to:

- Avoid household activities that could generate noise after midnight wherever possible.
- Take steps to reduce noise within the property.
- Encourage her children to be mindful of noise during the night.
- Prevent the family cat from accessing the kitchen overnight.

The downstairs resident:

- Acknowledged the impact his behaviour had on his neighbour.
- Apologised for causing distress.
- Agreed to approach concerns in a calmer and more constructive way.
- Became more understanding of the family's circumstances.



A particularly positive development emerged when both parties discovered a shared cultural background. The downstairs resident suggested that his partner introduce herself to the mother, helping to create a more welcoming and supportive connection. The family expressed a genuine desire to build a positive relationship with their neighbour and include her with the wider community of residents.

Conclusion

This case demonstrates how neighbour disputes are often about far more than the issue initially reported. Behind complaints about noise were complex factors including trauma, fear, isolation, family pressures, and differing lifestyles.

Through patient communication, active listening, and a focus on understanding each party's perspective, the situation moved from conflict and mistrust towards empathy and cooperation. While practical measures were agreed to address the noise concerns, the most significant outcome was the development of mutual understanding and the opportunity for a more positive neighbourly relationship moving forward.

The case highlights the value of early intervention and mediation in helping residents move beyond assumptions, reduce tensions, and build stronger, more supportive communities.

A Volunteer's View

Here Elaine Hamilton reflects on her time as a volunteer mediator with PMS

It was June 2025 when I joined Portsmouth Mediation Service, initially as a trainee on our nifty six-day online training course – a widely-respected course attended by trainees from way beyond Hampshire – during a withering heatwave. Learning what mediation means in practice. Finding it to be a refined supportive response to members of the community who are often tired, distressed, or unsure where to turn next. Beginning to learn the ropes of PMS's tried and tested, often highly effective, accessible and comprehensive restorative mediation process. Also learning – being handily Portsmouth-based – if I'd be suitable, or if I could learn to be suitable, as a volunteer member of the established PMS team or not... I hoped so.

Not fully realising that it was only after my happy success in passing the course that my learning would really start.

Bit by bit, week by week. I did learn quickly how a brief and seemingly light initial enquiry to PMS can carry deep and complicated emotions with years of history. But only slowly learned how people may contact the service about a neighbour dispute, perhaps a tree that's grown to overshadow their home, or about a family tension within that home; about an abrupt breakdown in communication, or a disagreement that's only gradually become too difficult for them to manage alone; yet the details of each case probably always affect far more people than apparent. Sometimes the community-member will have already spoken to the police, courts, healthcare providers or housing partners. By the time they've reached us – anyway – I've learned that what they might well need most of all is for someone to listen to what they have to say, carefully, calmly and without judgement.

The early conversations are where mediation begins, long before any parties in conflict might be prepared, or ready, to sit down together. Beginning in the tone of the questions, with the patience to let someone explain, and the often-difficult discipline of swallowing all our own 'bright' ideas of what might seem to be good advice, suggestions, or answers. I've only learned while engaging in case work how powerful it can be simply to help someone slow down and describe what happened, and what's happening, as a way of letting them begin to see fresh

choices available to them. Or at the very least, for them to see there's now a chance for their concerns to be safely addressed and even perhaps resolved.

Working with my main mediation partner and mentor, and two others, over the past year, has helped shape me. I've watched these colleagues hold difficult conversations with steadiness, warmth and quiet confidence. Not taking over the story or deciding who's right: creating a space in which people can hear themselves and, sometimes, hear each other, differently. Witnessing their practices as their co-worker and supporter, has helped me understand the active and respectful work of impartiality leading me to eventually take on suitable cases independently, too.

The learning culture at Portsmouth Mediation Service is a gift. Weekly online team meetings, face-to-face at least once a month, one-to-one conversations, reflective practice and continuing professional development have all given me the chance to think about what I'm hearing, how I respond, and what good practice asks of me. Training and seminars on trauma-informed practice, restorative conversations, mental health, health inequalities and relational repair have helped me see conflict in a wider context. Our PMS researchers' work reveals again and again how conflict causes stress, loss, fear, isolation, and health-debilitation: all side-effects of people in situations where they feel disempowered and disregarded.

In the light of these findings, our mediation work is proved to be truly important and worthwhile: when we help to make even (what may seem to be) the little things better, the ripple of positive effects is often almost immeasurably large.

The impact of this lesson upon me has been great: how small some conflicts can look from the outside compared to how big they are to that person from the inside. Conflicts can steal someone's sleep, their sense of feeling at home; affect how a person walks down their street, how they relate to their friends and family. With all this in mind, while mediation will not minimise a person's problems, it will not promise easy answers either. It offers a supported pause: an opportunity for people to tell their story and perhaps recognise something new in it; to perhaps recognise another side to it; and to consider what might make daily life feel more manageable all round.

PMS is about facilitation, community engagement, care, safeguarding, and helping people make meaning from difficult experiences. Volunteering this past year has strengthened my wish to keep learning about psychology, trauma, attachment, identity and positive change. More than anything, it's reminded me that repair can begin with one respectful conversation, one carefully asked question, or one moment when a person realises, they've been respected.

I'm grateful to Portsmouth Mediation Service for welcoming me into this work, trusting me with the responsibilities it has so far, and giving me the ongoing training and support to grow. I've come to value not only what the service does for individuals and families, but also what it represents for the city. It carries a hopeful message: that conflict doesn't have to be the end of relationship, and that people can often find a better way forward when they're supported to speak honestly, listen carefully and take responsibility for what happens next.



Looking back over my first year, I feel proud to have found a place within Portsmouth Mediation Service. I've gained skills, confidence and insight, and a deeper appreciation of the courage it takes for people to enter into difficult conversations. Mediation is practical, hopeful and a profoundly valuable part of Portsmouth's community life.

The photo is by the marketing manager of City of Portsmouth College, Louise Davies, from a photo shoot there, where I was also a part time student, in early 2026.

Here below Marianne Clark also reveals some of her experience as Volunteer Mediator

I have volunteered with Portsmouth Mediation Service for the past 18 months, primarily assisting with landlord and tenant, property, and boundary disputes. The team has been incredibly welcoming and supportive, and I always look forward to the weekly meetings whenever I am able to attend.

Community mediation differs significantly from commercial mediation, as there is often little or no financial element involved. This can make it more challenging to engage both parties in the process, as there is no immediate pressure of legal or financial consequences. As part of my role, I undertake initial calls with one party and then contact the second party by email or post. A lack of response can be particularly difficult, as it leaves the first party without a clear resolution.

These early interactions have been invaluable in helping me develop my impartiality. It can be tempting to sympathise too strongly with one party, but I have learned to remain neutral by practicing active listening and reflecting back what is said, rather than agreeing. I have also noticed how many disputes in Portsmouth stem from the challenges of dense housing, and how important it is simply for people to feel heard. Allowing individuals to tell their story in a neutral space often helps to reduce their frustration and prevent escalation.

During mediations, it has become clear that underlying issues often sit beneath the presenting problem. This has reinforced the importance of moving parties away from fixed positions and towards their underlying interests, as emphasised in mediation training.



Overall, this experience has been extremely rewarding. I have greatly benefited from working alongside experienced mediators and learning from their insights and practice. It has strengthened my skills and further inspired me to continue working towards my goal of becoming a full-time mediator.

Celebrating 10 Years of the 'Sort it Out' Student Mediation.

We have recently agreed with University of Portsmouth Student Union that they will bring the day to day running of this peer mediation service in house in what promises to be a new and exciting season for this cutting-edge project. Spearheaded by Sue Austin - she reflects here on some of the journey so far.

Ten years ago, Portsmouth Mediation Service (PMS) was approached by our Joanne, who was then working within the University of Portsmouth Students' Union. Jo brought with her a strong background in, and passion for, restorative practice. She recognised the value that effective communication and conflict resolution skills could bring to university life, both within the workplace and across the wider student community. Around the same time, Jo also completed PMS's six-day Community Mediation Skills Course.

At that stage, PMS was already delivering mediation training to second-year Clinical Legal Education (CLE) students. In their final year, these students joined our team, working alongside experienced mediators as part of their degree assessment while gaining valuable practical experience.

It was through conversations with Jo that a gap within the University became clear: there was no dedicated, student-led mediation service to help students resolve conflict constructively. From that shared vision, the **'Sort It Out' Student Mediation Service** was born.

Our third-year CLE students took ownership of the service, running it as a professional organisation with roles including Director, Treasurer, Social Media Lead and Case Manager. They accepted referrals from fellow students and worked collaboratively to help their peers navigate conflict before it escalated, preventing disagreements from overshadowing the university experience. Their work not only supported students but also eased the demand on university staff dealing with conflict-related issues.



Pictured above are Sort it Out Directors Rabia & Cindy

Each year, a new cohort of students completed their mediation training and the responsibility for running the service was handed over, ensuring continuity while providing successive groups with invaluable leadership and practical experience.

Like so many initiatives, the service faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the disruption to university life, the student mediators adapted remarkably well, continuing to deliver the service remotely while managing the uncertainties and pressures they faced in their own lives. Their resilience, professionalism and commitment during this difficult period were exceptional.

As students returned to campus, university life looked very different. The landscape had changed, and with it came new challenges. The 'Sort It Out' service experienced a number of inevitable bumps in the road as everyone adapted to a new way of learning, working and supporting students.

Recognising the continuing importance of the service, the University of Portsmouth Students' Union approached PMS with an exciting proposal. Building on the success of the student-led model, they suggested training both Students' Union staff and student employees in community mediation skills so that the service could be delivered directly within the Students' Union, enabling it to grow, become more sustainable and reach even more students.

PMS is proud to continue supporting this transition, providing training, mentoring and ongoing guidance as the service develops under its new stewardship. We are confident that this partnership will strengthen and embed restorative approaches even further within the University community.

Alongside this exciting development, PMS will continue to train second-year Clinical Legal Education students, who work alongside our mediators in the wider community. This practical experience has inspired many students to pursue careers in mediation, law, community development and public service.

As we celebrate ten years of the 'Sort It Out' Student Mediation Service, we are incredibly proud of what has been achieved through collaboration, innovation and a shared commitment to restorative practice. We look forward to seeing the service continue to evolve, supporting future generations of students while promoting a culture where conflict is addressed positively, relationships are strengthened, and everyone has the opportunity to be heard.





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