



Portsmouth Mediation Service



Conflict, its Health Impacts and Restorative Interventions

Restorative Community Learning

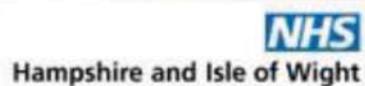


Table of Contents

Introduction, Background and Aims	page 2
The Research Team	page 3
Research Design	page 4
Self-Described Identity Table	page 6
Data Analysis	page 8
Table of Themes and Sub-Themes	page 9
Thematic Narratives	page 10
Conflict Avoidance and Health Impacts	page 11
Self-Reflection	page 13
Barriers to Community Group Engagement	page 14
Factors that Enable Community Learning	page 16
Recommendations for an Ongoing Research Agenda	page 18
Conclusion and the Next Steps	page 19
Reference List	page 20

Restorative Community Learning Conflict, its Health Impacts and Restorative Interventions

Introduction and Background to the Study

This Wessex Health Partners/National Institute of Health Research project builds on Portsmouth Mediation Services' (PMS) NHS England funded project "The Hidden Impact of Conflict on Health and Wellbeing (Portsmouth Mediation Service, 2025) researching the impact of everyday conflict (workplace, family, services, and neighbourhood) on Portsmouth residents' health and wellbeing. That research demonstrated that social conflict is a key determinant of health outcomes for people in Portsmouth. We define conflict as any situation in which individuals experience disagreement, tension, or opposing views. This includes disputes, arguments, or misunderstandings between two or more people, whether openly acknowledged or known only to one side. Including: discrimination, exclusion, and differing political or social perspectives. That research demonstrated:

- significant emotional and physical health impacts resulting from unresolved conflict
- a lack of awareness of local conflict resolution services
- a strong desire within communities to learn positive and constructive ways of managing conflict
- clear support for the use of community circles as a safe and accessible space to share experiences, learn together, build solidarity, reduce isolation, and support healing and resolution.

This Project's Aims

- To build on the previous research project through enabling those with lived experience to speak, to identify and promote a new co-produced research agenda highlighting interpersonal conflict as an under-researched health determinant.
- To explore the links between conflict and health and strategies for engaging communities in Restorative Community Learning, through the facilitation of three focus groups.
- To identify the potential for delivering a scalable, locally grounded model for Restorative Community Learning Circles across Portsmouth's diverse communities.
- To extend the skills, experience and leadership of two Community Researchers within the Community Participatory Action (CPAR) framework, using evidence-based practice in addressing the issue of conflict in neighbourhoods and workplaces through learning circles.

The Research Team

Laura

I am part of the Portsmouth Mediation team, serving as the Fundraising Coordinator, Community Mediator, and Restorative Practitioner. With over 15 years of experience in addressing community conflict, I have encountered a wide array of situations. The buzz of seeing two people entrenched in conflict come together, understand each other and agree a way forward is priceless – there is nothing else like it. For a long time, I believed this would be my sole job for life and, in many ways, that is still true: once restorative, always restorative.

In 2024 I had the opportunity to train as a Community Participatory Action Researcher. It's here that I shifted my restorative focus from helping people work through conflict to understanding conflict on a wider and deeper community level and the use of "real-world" research to inform that practice.

This project brings together my passion for restorative practice alongside a qualitative and rich research methodology like Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) feels like the most natural next step in my restorative journey. If I had to sum up my new role, it's hearing the voice of Portsmouth and being able to facilitate collaborations to put this into local community led action.

Nadiya

I came into this research through Portsmouth Mediation Service and Home education I was looking to get back into the work force but wanted something sustainable and community driven. PMS focuses on restorative practice, which means I spend a lot of time sitting with people in conflict trying to work out what's *really* going on - because, surprisingly often, it turns out the argument about the kettle is not actually about the kettle, it's something completely different.

Although I was only introduced to formal research last year, IPA felt weirdly familiar. Once we got past the long academic name, we realised it mostly involved doing what restorative practitioners naturally do: listening properly, spotting patterns, reading between the lines, and gently digging beneath the surface without making people feel interrogated. Being naturally outgoing helped, as I've always found people respond better to curiosity, honesty, and a smile than clipboards and serious faces. I do recognise that my restorative background means I naturally lean towards empathy and connection in the way I interpret people's experiences - but honestly, for this kind of research, that felt more like a strength than a problem.

Aaron

I am Associate Professor of Criminal Justice and Social Complexity at the University of Portsmouth. Since 2022 we have been developing the Portsmouth Relational and Restorative Practice Community of Inquiry. This is a collaborative network that includes the University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth Mediation Service, Portsmouth Hospitals University NHS FT, Portsmouth City Council, and other Voluntary Sector partners. This project has emerged from that network. My research focuses on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within society and the importance of understanding people within the context of their lives using qualitative methodologies such as IPA, with the aim of amplifying marginalized voices in a way that facilitates change.

My role within this project has been to supervise Laura and Nadiya in developing, implementing and writing up the project.

Research Design

Methodology

Building on Aaron's previous work (e.g. Pycroft et al 2015; Christen-Schneider and Pycroft, 2021) This study adopted Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative methodological approach to Community Participatory Action Research. The previous CPAR research indicated that smaller group settings provided the time and space necessary for participants to share openly, particularly when discussing sensitive or personal experiences. Consequently, focus groups were selected as the method of data collection. The advantages of IPA for this project were: (1) rather than assuming that we know what the issues for communities are it allows for the research question/s and areas for focus to emerge from the participants themselves (2) the collection of rich data that reflected the lived experiences of participants, (3) enabling the researchers to utilize their own practice experience in engaging with the focus groups and co-constructing new knowledge with the participants and to explore it with them.

Research Ethics

This project was approved by University of Portsmouth Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (FHSS 2026-018). Informed consent was taken for all participants including permission for audio recording and photography and were informed that all data would be anonymized in reporting. Pseudonyms (e.g. P1/P2) were used to protect participant identity in the table.

Participant Groups

We used a specially convened meeting of the Portsmouth Relational and Restorative Community of Inquiry to bring together a range of organizations to discuss our project and to seek guidance from those present as to potential areas of interest, and locations for the project. This enabled us to identify potential research participants and broad guidance on topics for discussion. Building on these connections, a convenience sampling strategy was used to develop perspectives across different lived experiences and communities. The settings were intentionally chosen to support openness and recognize that familiarity and accessibility can significantly influence participants' willingness to share. Consistent with the researchers' roles as restorative practitioners, the environment for each focus group was carefully considered to maximize participant comfort and psychological safety.



Data collection

Data was collected through three focus groups. Each group was guided by a set of semi-structured questions relevant to their context and which were iteratively refined with each group building on the previous one:

- **Focus Group 1:** Individuals experiencing ongoing conflict who are already using PMS explored barriers to engagement and experiences of conflict. This was held in a neutral but accessible space
- **Focus Group 2:** Members of the older generation who already visit a community space examined how participants best learn something new. This took place in a familiar community centre.
- **Focus Group 3:** Parents from a different cultural background, accessed through an existing parent group focused on how individuals had been taught to understand and manage conflict. This was conducted in a space regularly used by participants for their children.



This approach within existing networks supported trust and openness, resulting in a diverse cross-section of participants ($n=15$) (aged approximately 20 to 70+) with varied personal, cultural, and professional backgrounds. Our flexible and restorative approach enabled depth within each group while contributing to shared themes across the study. Discussions were documented through detailed notes, supported by audio recordings where consent was given, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Self-described Identity Table

Rather than formally collecting demographic data we opted to use identity summaries that participants were willing to share and were drawn from conversations during the focus groups (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2011). Of the 15 participants, four chose not to disclose their details and remained silent within their respective groups.

Participants	Gender	Self-described Identity
P1	F	Life coach, actor, lives with partner, energetic, kind, supportive. Nature is her happy place and she loves music
P2	M	Conflict avoider, worked in high conflict, listener, calm, good manager, planning on moving house. Concert and music where they lost track of time.
P3	F	Scientific researcher, post menopause, was a people pleaser, taken a long time to come to that decision and the menopause made it easy, willing to help. Last happy place was at the theatre.
P4	F	Father died when young in an accident, will give anything a go, lives with grandson, daughter died, hubby recently died after illness. Time with her grandson and his wellness are her happy place.
P5	F	Retired manager was lost as no team around her, lives on her own, doesn't do IT, joined pensioners group then moved on to a gardening group but found it wasn't social and she has her own garden. Confident enough to take a first step on her own going to groups. Good conversations and interesting people are her happy place.

P6	F	Mother and teacher, has ADHD, social media learner, in relationships she uses clear but firm instruction and she is supportive. Family brings her joy.
P7	F	Doesn't live in Portsmouth, visiting family, has mental health issues and an ex-friend invited and took her to her first community group.
P8	M	Adopted not interested in meeting real parents, doesn't live in Portsmouth, aunt works for the NHS, went to A&E and they told him to go home and take a bath, this is his example of the groups he's joined before that don't know what to do with him.
P9	F	Foster-parent, had an angry mother, has set boundaries, had a good and patient Dad, undertaken therapeutic training, young matriarch, divorced, work in progress, very self-reflective, honest with herself, leads by example.
P10	F	African mother, minister's family, son, cancer survivor, conflict avoider, has swallowed her conflict to keep the peace and thinks that has given her cancer as a fit and healthy person.
P11	F	Well loved by family and close to them, factory worker, pressured for children, 20-year toxic relationship.

Data Analysis

Using IPA, analysis involved close, iterative engagement with the transcripts, identifying patterns, themes, and points of convergence and divergence across groups. While IPA typically focuses on smaller, more homogeneous samples, the approach was adapted to allow for both in-depth exploration within groups and the connections of themes and sub-themes emerging from the discussion. These are presented in narrative form, allowing for the participant voices to be clearly stated.

Laura and Nadiya actively used a restorative approach within the study, shaped by their professional backgrounds. This influenced both the facilitation of the focus groups and the interpretation of the data, with a consistent emphasis on relational dynamics, empathy, and wellbeing. Rather than being removed, this positioning was consciously reflected as part of the analytical process. A key part of Aaron's role was to enable a wider discussion of the findings with Laura and Nadiya to try and ensure that they did not simply find what they were looking for and to allow for their assumptions to be challenged.



Table of Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Different conflict types	Conflict avoidance and health impacts	Self-reflection	Barriers to community engagement	Factors enabling community learning
Sub-themes	Community conflict	Emotional health	Aggressive parenting	Lack of confidence and personal invitation and lack of local knowledge	Clear vision
	Family conflict	Physical health	Encourage feelings and openness	Physical barriers	Opportunity to share story
	Ongoing	Changes in behaviour	Personal growth	Non-inclusive and unclear advertising	Discovery of skills
	Actively seeking to positively deal with the conflict	Positive intention			Group learning
	Ongoing outside help	Silence			
	Sharing how you feel	Conflict avoidance			

Thematic Narratives

Different conflict types

The areas of conflict discussed across the three focus groups were mainly community conflict and family conflict, with one participant sharing about a past workplace conflict. Within these experiences, participants described a range of contributing factors, including power imbalances, ego, dishonesty, a lack of listening, loss of trust, frustration, manipulation, repeated parenting or family cycles, and conflict avoidance.

"...it's causing some sort of trauma, some sort of cycle of why me? I don't understand. I've got a friend at the moment and they keep inviting it. You don't want it then don't invite it, don't say yes, I'll hold that for you..." (P3)

Most of the conflicts discussed were ongoing; however, participants reported actively trying to work through them rather than disengaging or withdrawing entirely:

And I've done it quite a few times with my children, with my grandchildren, with foster children, and I've said, you know what, mummy, Nanny, XXX, was really out of order earlier. I shouldn't have done X, Y, Z, what I did? You know? I shouldn't have done that. And I'll explain I was either tired, hungry, sad, or whatever, and then say and actually, grownups make mistakes too. It's really or if it's a grown-up, we can talk to that, to that, and say that too. Do you know what I make mistakes, because I'm human, and I'm okay with that now, but it's taken me older than most. Do you tell me, a long time to get to that level of peace" (P9)

Some participants were keen to try and resolve the conflict by taking deliberate interpersonal strategies:

"The best way to deal with conflict is to give them space and not to argue back, just coping mechanism and one of my cousins works for the NHS and she taught me them. I've done a conflict resolution course, and it tells you to not shout back." (P8)

I wanted to turn that around and break that cycle. So, I think I did a lot of it naturally, but you still also do naturally what you've been brought up with. So there'd be the odd ranting and raving day, you know, you can't, you can't help it if that's what you've seen, that's what, well, then when I did it properly and looked into the training, it came kind of came natural, but it also some of the sayings that we use a lot are mantras (P9)

Only one participant sought formal, external support in relation to community conflict:

"When Mediation came you really helped people think differently but they soon slipped back and nothing has moved, but I'm not giving up hope I'm going to keep watering the positive ideas then positivity will grow" (P1)

All other participants described managing their conflicts independently or with informal support from friends and family.

Summary

The focus groups highlighted that community, and family conflicts are often sustained by communication breakdowns, trust issues, and conflict avoidance, with most participants relying on personal rather than formal support, often with limited success.

Conflict Avoidance and Health Impacts

Consistent with the initial CPAR research we see heavy emotional health impact of conflict, highlighting that conflict is not only a social or relational issue it is closely linked to health and wellbeing. Participants described experiencing, persistent anxiety and stress, emotional exhaustion, changes in behaviour, such as avoiding people or altering walking routes. These experiences often left people feeling less motivated, increasingly overwhelmed, and with a reduced capacity to cope with everyday life, affecting how they related to themselves and those around them.

"How I used to love where I lived that really has massively changed. Its impacted me and that sense of futility. How is this ever gonna change I have faith and hope and I am doing everything I can. But yeah, I know that my shoulders feel heavy, and I see some of them or I see the calendars coming closer to spring and oh god what's gonna come and anticipation where I'm already stressed about it like, before its even happened. When it might not happen but because there hasn't been that closure or understanding so I'm permanently waiting for the next thing." (P1)

The research also highlights the cumulative physical health impact of long-term conflict avoidance. P10 reflected that a lifetime of holding emotions in and avoiding difficult conversations may have contributed to her experience of cancer. While this does not indicate a causal link, it reflects a lived belief that unexpressed emotional strain can become embodied over time.

Another participant shared how a genetic auto immune condition has in her view likely been made worse by lifelong family conflict.

"It really attacked my spine is because I've held that stuff in. I held that stress for a long time. I didn't share it, didn't let it out". (P9)

When conflict is not expressed, processed, or resolved, it does not disappear, it is often carried in the body and mind, with ongoing implications for wellbeing. Conflict avoidance was a common response discussed. For some, conflict was actively avoided;

"I don't want to see people. I literally have changed the way I'm living on the road" (P1)

and some participants described being on the receiving end of others avoiding conflict.

"I still get messages from her, like randomly "did you hear music at 10'clock last night?" um did you hear music at 2 o'clock? My husband went to work and they had a lock in till half five in the morning"... she won't go to the council so she's moaning at me like". (P1)

The intention behind conflict avoidance was often linked to a desire to preserve relationships, alongside uncertainty or lack of confidence in how to engage in difficult conversations.

P10/11 also reflected on how African cultural expectations around maintaining harmony and "keeping the peace" can, at times, contribute to the avoidance or internalisation of conflict. With P10 saying that the underlying intention of these cultural norms is positive, rooted in a desire for people to get along, preserve relationships, and prevent situations from escalating.

"Being the peacemaker, running away from conflict, but running away from conflict didn't mean that I wasn't conflicted." (P10)

However, P10 noted that in practice this can sometimes result in silence or unresolved tension, where difficult issues are absorbed rather than spoken about. Instead of creating space to talk through conflict, these expectations can unintentionally discourage open expression, making it harder to address challenges and move towards resolution.

"And then it went into silence, you it was quick for me to recognise the silence, because that was my modus operandi. Also, I'm a conflict avoider." (P10)

One participant shared how they have always sought to avoid conflict. Another participant recognized that this individual doesn't avoid conflict and are willing to have difficult conversations.

"That's not conflict that's having a discussion about it"

The intention of the supposed conflict avoider was clearly positive, wanting to keep the peace,

"You do, but you avoid it in a Switzerland type of way don't you. You try and see other sides it's like the balancing scales of justice isn't it, but also possibly apt" (P3)

Another participant described a cultural upbringing that encouraged avoiding conflict, remaining silent, and leaving their voice unheard, yet once again the intentions were to often linked to expectations in their upbringing.

"I mean, now look at it like a lifetime of being the peacemaker, running away from conflict, but running away from conflict didn't mean that I wasn't conflicted. It didn't mean that I wasn't dealing with those emotions. I just gave myself some credit that, oh, I'm not, I don't have rage, so I'm not in your face. I

don't shout; I don't I'm not aggressive. I'm not the person who you wouldn't hear me shout, voices matching tonality when you're shouting; you wouldn't hear me shouting. I give myself all this credit." (P10)

Summary: Conflict whether it be present every day, or in the past the body holds on to it and far too often we carry on anyway. This research builds on the previous information that it doesn't go away it need to be released and accepted for people to really thrive.



Self-Reflection

All participants who were previously, or are currently, experiencing conflict described engaging in meaningful self-reflection and taking active steps to strengthen relationships and seek resolution.

One participant, who is a life coach, is currently navigating family conflict. Through deep personal reflection, she has explored underlying contributors to these difficulties and linked them to patterns formed through her own upbringing, particularly a lifelong tendency to suppress or “swallow” conflict. Observing these same patterns emerging in her son prompted her to take purposeful action to address and disrupt this cycle. She has intentionally prioritised open communication, recognising that emotional outbursts may sometimes need space to happen for feelings to be expressed rather than contained. Reflecting on this, she shared:

“So, I understand silence very well. So, when I saw it repeating in him, I said to him that you need to talk. You need to trash it. Don’t swallow it. And I said to him, I say, you’ve seen me go through cancer, and we don’t have an explanation. We don’t have an explanation for the cancer, because I tell thee, I’m physically fit and all this and all that. But I mean, now look at it like a lifetime of swallowing it, freezing out your emotions, being the peacemaker, running away from conflict, but running away from conflict didn’t mean that I wasn’t conflicted. (P10)

These changes reflect significant personal growth, driven by her commitment to break intergenerational patterns and support healthier, more open ways of relating within her family.

Another participant has self-reflected on her life experience, which involved aggressive parenting from one parent and gentle parenting from the other and this led her to reflect and seek to parent differently and later training to be a foster carer, which has hugely positively impacted *all* her relationships:

“I was very much of aware how unhealthy my own mother’s relationship to me”(P9)

“I would say, after a few years, in fostering my whole self-had changed, and I much preferred the new version of myself” (P9)

In this context using personal and occupational resources to build on can become important, participant 9 also emphasized the importance of sharing feelings:

“It’s about balance. I think because keeping emotions in has been proven, like you say, to be very unhealthy, it’s having that balance in conflict situations. And sometimes, I think the good thing that they teach in therapeutic parenting is none of us is perfect”

This can lead to personal growth:

“I think the good thing that they teach in therapeutic parenting is none of us is perfect, so occasionally we’re going to lose our temper, and we are going to shout, even if we’ve got all these tools in our toolbox that how to respond, we are going to lose it. We’re human. It happens. We might be having an off day, we might be hungry, sad, time we lose it. But the good thing is, is that you’re aware, and then afterwards you set that example” (P9)

And through a process of self-reflection, it is possible to change the ways in which things are dealt with:

"It has taken a long time to learn as by nature I am a people pleaser, and I need approval and I need validation from others because then I know I am okay. So, it's taken a long time to get to a point where I have to separate or I've learned how to separate myself from others, where I realise what's, mine is mine and what's yours is yours". (P3)

Summary

Conflict can create opportunities for self-reflection. Those who experience conflict and desire resolution and restoration can experience personal emotional growth, even when this requires facing discomfort or making difficult changes. Without conflict, this self-examination may not occur. Early self-reflection can be particularly impactful, shaping how future conflict situations are approached, understood, and responded to.

Barriers to Community Group Engagement

Participants described a range of emotional, social, and structural barriers to engaging in community groups. These included fear of judgement, lack of confidence, prior negative experiences, and uncertainty about expectations.

Participants described how they were more likely to attend a community group when someone personally invited them or offered to go with them. Knowing and trusting the person extending the invitation helped transfer that sense of trust to the new group, increasing their confidence to attend.

"when I retired and I hadn't realised it at the time but I had always worked as part of a team and then when I retired I was on my own, so... what am I going to do? so I joined different things and gradually different things came in, but in Portsmouth if you join one group then it's like a spiders web and then your told about another group and then something else and from there it's something else but you have to make that first step that first door to get that information"(P5)

Several participants reflected that without a personal invitation accessing community groups can feel significantly more difficult with one individual sharing the physical barrier of a closed door to their singing group. They shared how challenging it was to simply open the door and enter space alone.

"It was going through that door on my own I could hear them singing on the other side, but I couldn't see inside that door so I waited until they stopped singing and I knocked on the door and went hello and that was it, just opening that first door?" So just logistically would it have been better if you could have seen in? "Yes, I like to see in!" (P5)

Another point discussed was inclusive advertising of community learning groups. It needs to be inclusive in the picture and words. One participant shared:

"Interesting I belong to a walking football club... and they gave me a picture and invited me to come along and, on this picture, there were five guys. I said to the guy who was doing it Coach Are women allowed. Yeah yeah. I turned up and luckily, he must of got it.. he bought two females' coaches."

This participant felt able to ask if women were allowed, but not everyone would have the confidence to do this. Advertising plays a key role in engagement.

A warm, visible welcome is equally important. Having someone at the door to greet participants, or maintaining an open, visible and accessible entrance, helps reduce the anxiety that can come from entering an unfamiliar environment. Small gestures of welcome (hello and offer of a drink) can significantly ease the fear of the unknown and support people to feel safe, included, and ready to engage. As with the CPAR research, once again it was evident across the three focus groups that food and drink helped them to feel comfortable, valued, and connected. Participants also suggested that it be included in future community learning.

"It is difficult and ya know if you invite people round for cake and coffee everyone knows what cake and coffee is" (P2)

For some participants, online platforms are a keyway that they research information, learn informally, and connect with others, suggesting that community engagement increasingly spans both physical and digital spaces.

"Learning a lot on socials especially about clips on ADHD about stories and someone's journeys it's the tone they use as well initially a lot of it was coming up on my feeds and now, I go and follow content creators". (P6)

These findings suggest that restorative learning environments function not only as educational spaces but also as sites of social connection, identity formation, and wellbeing support. We also found that social media, although a good way to educate, also left people behind.

"I can give you an example of that so I went online this morning to do it online ok, now I don't know whether how I can download my photograph or is the computer going to take a photograph of me? Cause I know that can happen sometimes, so what did I do? In the end binned that, went off and got the 4 photographs done in Asda's and then I'll go home and fill in the paper... so I didn't know how or what it was gonna do. That's the thing"(P5)

This is an example of how the older generation are often frustrated with technology and often blaming themselves first, whereas the younger generation blames technology.

Summary

Participants shared those emotional, social, and practical barriers; such as fear of judgement, low confidence, and past experiences, can make it difficult to engage in community learning. Personal invitations and trusted relationships played a key role in supporting attendance, while inclusive communication and a warm, visible welcome helped reduce anxiety. Simple gestures, such as offering food and drink, helped people feel comfortable, valued, and connected.

While restorative training was seen as highly beneficial, participants felt it is often accessed mainly by professionals or those actively seeking support, rather than being widely available. They highlighted the importance of creating accessible, informal, community-based learning spaces that support connection, wellbeing, and inclusion. Participants also noted that while digital communication can support awareness and learning, it can create barriers for some people, particularly the older generation and those less confident using technology.

Factors that Enable Community Learning

All participants were able to describe clearly what a vision of community learning would need to be in terms of inclusive, accessible, and engaging. Their vision was clear: relationships should be at the centre of both its purpose and design. They described a place where people learn with and from one another, where lived experience is valued, and where emotions are seen as an important part of learning. This approach naturally fosters both individual and collective reflection, supporting a deeper awareness of personal patterns, responses, and relational dynamics. It encourages participants not only to gain knowledge, but to grow in understanding of themselves and others.

"Community is where you can sit have a coffee and a chat, it's opening that door and you can see in" (P5)

"If you invite people round for cake and coffee everyone knows what cake and coffee is" (P2)

All three groups enjoyed and valued the focus group experience, as an opportunity to share their story, with one participant saying,

"Apologies for dumping on you. But I enjoyed the session more than I bargained for. Merely came along for socialising not with any intent to talk". (P10)

Relational learning such as conflict resolution, therapeutic parenting, and life coaching, has clearly encouraged self-reflection and strengthened participants' ability to manage conflict constructively. However, access is often limited to professionals or those already experiencing significant conflict or trauma. Participants emphasised that discovering new skills through peer learning is central to community learning. One participant described how, when training someone new at work, she draws on the idea that everyone brings their own skills and value. By watching or listening to how another person approaches a task, people can learn new and useful ways of doing things.

"Because everybody has skills that you don't have. You may not know what skill you have, but someone watching you do the job can see that you have something to add. So everybody has something to add. So you actually learn from them, and they learn from you". (P10)

In the context of Community Learning, it could be learning a relational approach from hearing someone sharing their experience. The three focus groups shared a range of real-life, tried-and-tested relational approaches, including both helpful and unhelpful responses to conflict. A number of these examples are outlined below.

"Having a conversation between two people without shouting back". (P8)

"One of the things I have learnt quite recently is that when you got someone who wants to get into arguments and try and manipulate you into saying something else, one thing learn is to be really firm and not to even try and say something in a different way. Because sometimes they are choosing not to understand what you are saying. If I know that what I am saying is really clear, I don't change my word. I just repeat myself". (P6)

Participants also reflected on the modelling of good practices, particularly participant 9:

"Just even do it just by setting an example. So say, like in the library, when I do book club or new club, I try to say kind and use positive words all the time. You're setting an example all the time.." (P9)

"So, and if it's a conflict between two little people, I kind of quite often put my hands up and say, oh, remember, we only have kindness in this building. And I might even say to them, if they were of an age, I think, what can we do to overcome this together without you all getting cross? You know, because it's like more, I would say more positive words. It's hard in the moment to do it. And I've been practicing for 14 years". (P9)

Community Learning could provide a space in which this kind of relational learning is shared, explored, and strengthened.

Summary

Although not specifically designed to do so participants reported gaining meaningful support and insight from each focus group hosted, suggesting that restorative learning circles and conflict resolution training could provide valuable skills and pathways for addressing conflict more effectively. Across all three groups, a clear vision emerged for community learning centred

on relationships, shared experience, and emotional understanding. Peer learning was seen as central, supporting both individual and collective reflection. Participants described effective community learning spaces as non-hierarchical, flexible, welcoming, and consistent, with a strong focus on connection and dialogue. They also shared real-life relational approaches to conflict, highlighting the potential to recognise and build on these everyday strengths to support the development of a more restorative culture.

COMMUNITY LEARNING CIRCLES

What Really Makes Community Work?

We're visiting your community as part of our Community Research Project. Were looking to have conversations about your lived experience in the community over tea/coffee and very good cake!!!!

Date: 07/04/26

Time : 12-1.30pm

Venue: Commercial Road, City Buildings

Through relaxed and friendly conversations, we hope to learn more about community relationships—celebrating the positives, exploring the challenges, and discovering what's needed to build stronger, more connected communities. Everyone is welcome. To book your space (and so we can check dietary requirements and make sure there's plenty of cake!), please email: nadiya@portsmouthmediationservice.org.uk

Recommendations for an Ongoing Research Agenda

This research continues to echo the initial CPAR findings around conflict, its health impact, and the community desire for restorative learning. The researchers continue to refine their research skills and recognised the power of their restorative skills, as participants across all three groups shared openly and with ease. This time, using IPA enabled the researchers to reflect more deeply on both participants' experiences and their own, supporting a more fluid, community-led approach and strengthening the participants and the researcher's confidence in the process.

The research has revealed further rich findings around conflict, health impacts, and the strong desire within the community to learn restorative skills. A key outcome has been the development of a clear plan for a locally led, grounded model of Restorative Community Learning across Portsmouth's diverse communities. Participants were engaged and shared a clear vision of what this should look like.

The findings also highlight some key areas for further exploration to strengthen the Community Model for Restorative Learning, including gaining a deeper understanding of conflict avoidance and self-reflection. This will help ensure the model can effectively support learning and engagement in practice.

Prioritize restorative community learning

This approach needs to be central to community development to strengthen relationships, wellbeing, and conflict resolution. However, this cannot be a top down, one size fits all approach.

Create relational, non-hierarchical informal neutral learning spaces

Valuing all voices, staying flexible, facilitating natural conversation, mutual empathy and respect, supports both self-reflection and shared group learning. This can be enabled through a critical realist approach to understanding communities as complex adaptive systems and conflict as emergent properties (see e.g. Pycroft and Bartollas, 2014) from those communities. A Theory of Change (TOC) (see e.g. <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/strategy-and-impact/strategy-and-business-planning/theory-of-change/>) approach can facilitate the working with the self-organizing capabilities of individuals, groups and communities to champion relational and restorative approaches through the following themes that emerge from this project:

Use Personal Invitations and warm welcomes

Personal outreach, accessible entry points, and a welcoming host. It is essential not to "go all professional and administrative."

Share Food and Drinks to Build Connection

Food and drink make people feel valued and comfortable and it helps relationship building. These 'liturgies of the everyday' build inclusive communities.

Ensure Consistency and Regularity

Trust and belonging grow through consistent facilitation and regular sessions enabled by proper resourcing.

Expand Accessible Restorative Training

Offer restorative learning widely in community hubs (such as community centres) that are easily accessible by transport to build relationships, wellbeing, early conflict resolution, and shared responsibility.

Integrate Digital and Informal Learning Spaces

Using online platforms and social media is a key part of community engagement and learning.

Conclusion and the Next Steps

In conclusion, we now have two research studies carried out in Portsmouth confirming the need for an informal, inclusive, and psychologically safe space for group learning, where dialogue can occur naturally. As with the previous project, these three focus groups have also given glimpses of what a restorative community learning space could look and feel like and tying in with what the participants are saying they need. In this sense the project through engaging with the people who are experiencing conflict, the two studies offer a proof of concept, supported by the practice and experience of organisations such as PMS.

Restorative Community Learning offers a promising framework for addressing these needs by prioritising relationship-building, shared experience, and co-created learning. However, its effectiveness depends on relational, consistent, accessible approach and sustained funding.

The findings also highlight a pattern of conflict avoidance within communities. While often rooted in positive intentions such as preserving relationships, avoidance can result in unresolved issues persisting and negatively impacting wellbeing.

Overall, the study suggests that strengthening relational approaches to community learning may contribute meaningfully to reducing conflict-related emotional health impact and support more inclusive, connected, healthier and happier communities.

All the evidence demonstrates that restorative learning has universal relevance and should be made widely accessible. However, it cannot be imposed “top down” and needs to be facilitated within existing community groups and organizations and in novel ways. This project will inform ongoing discussions within the Portsmouth Relational and Restorative Community of Inquiry and its network of members to identify how this is best achieved.

We need to understand how these findings fit within the wider literature and research findings and to learn from other examples of developing and growing community restorative learning.

As we listen, research and grow then there will be a need for local institutions to change their practices to meet these growing expectations of not just conflict resolution but human flourishing.

Reference List

Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*. Sage Publications

Portsmouth Mediation Service (2025) *The Hidden Impact of Conflict on Health and Wellbeing in Portsmouth*. <https://thamesvalley.hee.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2025/10/Portsmouth-Mediation-Service-CPAR-Research-Report.pdf>

Christen-Schneider, C. and Pycroft, A (2021) 'An exploration of trauma-informed practices in restorative justice: a phenomenological study' in *International Journal of Restorative Justice* <https://researchportal.port.ac.uk/en/publications/an-exploration-of-trauma-informed-practices-in-restorative-justice/>

Pycroft, A., Wallis, A., and Bigg, J., and Webster, G. (2015) 'Participation, Engagement and Change: A Study of the Experiences of Service Users of the Unified Adolescent Team' *British Journal of Social Work* 45, 2, p. 422–439
<https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/45/2/422/1674635>

Pycroft, A., and Bartollas, C., (2014) *Applying Complexity Theory: Whole Systems Approaches to Criminal Justice and Social Work*. Policy Press



**Authors: Laura Rook (Portsmouth Mediation Service),
Nadiya El Samerai (Portsmouth Mediation Service)
and Aaron Pycroft (University of Portsmouth)^{1 2}**

¹ This is a dynamic document (version 1.01) which can be distributed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0). If you do use any of the materials, then we ask that you acknowledge the source and use the following reference: Rook, L., Al Samerai, N, and Pycroft, A. (2026) *Restorative Community Learning: Conflict, its Health Impacts and Restorative Interventions*. Portsmouth Mediation Service

² Author for correspondence: aaaron.pycroft@port.ac.uk

Portsmouth Mediation Service

Email: steve@portsmouthmediationservice.org.uk

www.portsmouthmediationservice.org.uk

 facebook.com/portsmouthmediation

Registered Charity No. 1061569 Registered Company No. 3258327



COMMEMORATION OF THE SILVER