

WEST HEIDELBERG  
COMMUNITY  
LEGAL SERVICE



**‘Creating the Right Spaces: Civil Participation  
and Social Inclusion’**

A Report on the West Heidelberg Residents’  
Conflict Management Workshops 2010

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## 1. Introduction

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The West Heidelberg Community Legal Service (WHCLS) received a Community Development Grant from the Banyule City Council in 2009 which allowed for four conflict management workshops to be conducted with residents from the local housing estates. The initial impetus for applying for this grant stemmed from the aims identified by the Residents' Group 3081 (RG 3081) and the WHCLS which mainly centred on encouraging further community engagement and development. Residents had raised a real need in the community to learn particular skills that could help them address problems they faced as public housing tenants as well as members within the community. The WHCLS saw that part of its role was contributing to this aim by providing social inclusion programs enhancing civil participation for the local community.

The Director of the WHCLS, Liz Curran, in consultation with Alikki Vernon, a professional facilitator and lecturer on conflict management, outlined a three tiered project when applying for the council grant. The overall objectives of the project were to i) benefit people with the least access to justice and community development to voice their concerns and learn skills that could be helpful to them; ii) support residents to share their perspectives and experiences with social agencies and decision-makers; and iii) assist social agencies to better understand the needs of the community they are trying to serve. The grant that was received was less than half the amount sought, reducing the project to the first objective and the completion of stage one of a multilayered plan. Stage one involved four workshops with a group of nine West Heidelberg public housing estate residents.

The aim of the conflict management workshops was twofold. First, to facilitate a discussion among residents to identify the problems and concerns they faced within the local community. A part of this discussion also involved identifying the methods they presently used to address these issues and how effective they were. Second, to assist residents in outlining the type of skills that they thought useful for their own personal development as well as those that could be helpful in communicating effectively with others including government departments and social agencies. Each of these aims were achieved although the residents concluded that ongoing workshops are required to help them continue in developing the skills they acquired and to support their efforts to act more proactively to reduce and address conflicts that may arise in the community.

The participation of the residents in the workshops was impressive and indicated the benefits of interactive problem-solving and conflict management skills development within the community sector. Each participant was able to identify individual concerns and experiences as well as collective issues that required attention. A complex picture of personal and systemic concerns was constructed which aided the group in identifying the sorts of skills they required to better engage with themselves, in personal relationships and within the community at large. Possible future actions to address individual and social problems were also identified. The trust and rapport which developed in the group created the 'right space' for sharing, learning, and for future support. The residents acknowledged that individually and collectively they could support each other in fostering better relationships and community engagement.

It was evident from the workshops that other 'right spaces' could also be created with government and social agencies. The possibility of the residents discussing their concerns with agencies in a facilitated process which i) supported all those participating to better understand each other, ii) identified ways to improve a situation and iii) helped improve their relationship was regarded as a step in the right direction. The residents discussed how their engagement with the Office of Housing was generally negative. Opportunities to improve this and foster processes that encourage dialogue, better relationships and outcomes were highlighted as a high priority for residents. Learning more about their human rights and accessing social agencies to support in this were also viewed as essential.

The WHCLS recognises that it could play, along with its partner agencies, a more extensive role in supporting the community to be involved in working out what are the right spaces and processes that can address their needs and concerns. The series of workshops offered were one step toward fulfilling this role. The hope is that this project is one stage in a broader project which aims to bring authorities, social agencies and the community together to discuss how issues can be addressed before they escalate into intractable conflict (or worse) by way of early intervention and prevention. This would include relevant agencies setting aside resources to assist in resolving some of these issues, including conflict management and constructive communication training among staff. The broader aim would also involve identifying a variety of restorative conflict management and dialogue processes that could be both preventative as well as be able to address conflicts, disputes and tensions that do

arise more effectively. The objectives are i) to identify with the community processes that encourage and support inclusion, discussion and better relationships and ii) promote a culture of constructive communication.<sup>1</sup>

The report is written with the view that the workshops and the lessons drawn from them can aid in providing a community engagement model for other residential groups in different localities as well as for other community projects with different social groups. With this aim in mind, the hope is to encourage the completion of the project as envisaged which involves a comprehensive approach to civil participation, conflict management and constructive communication involving all sectors of civil society.

## 2. Workshop structure and approach

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The WHCLS in discussions with Neighbourhood Renewal and other workers at the Banyule Community Health Service, in drug and alcohol counselling, mental health, and emergency relief, identified that there were members of the local community who wanted to move forward on issues that affected their lives and well being. Based on a community consultation conducted by the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service between April- October 2009 and an emergent Scoping Paper, residents of the housing estates were viewed as those with the least access to justice in the City of Banyule and who had a number of pressing issues requiring attention.

The conflict management workshops were offered to residents in West Heidelberg public housing by Liz Curran at a Residents' Group 3081 (RG 3081) meeting. Liz had previously worked with this group to discuss human rights issues and had helped them compile a submission on public housing which was presented to the Minister of Housing on 18 November 2009 and a Family and Community Committee Inquiry into the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing in Victoria on 29 January 2010. Some residents involved in the Residents Group 3081 indicated that they wanted to be involved in the workshops. A subsequent flyer (see appendix) detailing the workshops and requirements was posted at the Banyule Community Health

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<sup>1</sup> DB Moore, 'From "resolving grievances" to "a culture of constructive communication": Really taking the heat out of Victorian Public Sector workplace issues', a paper developed into a report for the State Services Authority titled *Developing Conflict Resilient Workplaces: A report for Victorian public sector leaders*, (2010), SSA, Victoria.

Centre with some residents referred by counsellors and doctors at Banyule Community Health who saw the flyers and others who had seen the flyer themselves. The flyer stated that there was a quota of 12 to 14 people who could participate and that they were required to attend all three workshops offered on Friday afternoons in April. The fourth workshop was offered as an option at the third gathering and then became a request from the residents. There were 14 residents signed up for the workshops, with 9 present on the first day.

The choice of venue and time for the workshops was based on what would best suit the residents. The health centre was already a place that residents were familiar with and able to get to. The WHCLS provided a good size room with useful facilities to conduct interactive workshops. The time of the workshops was between 1:00 to 3:00pm allowing people with school aged children to attend. The same day of the week was chosen, a Friday, to provide consistency and ease of memory. The residents acknowledged that each of these considerations had been useful in their involvement.

From the budget, beverages and snacks were provided for each of the workshops. This was appreciated by the participants who were also free to take any remaining catering home.

The structure of the workshops was developed by the facilitator in consultation with Liz Curran. Liz had familiarity with the residents and had participated in their discussions around their requirements and preferences. Alikki Vernon then designed and conducted each of the workshops. Although a general framework was provided in the flyer to the residents, which outlined the structure of the workshops, there was flexibility in the design to address the immediate needs and preferences of the participants. At the end of each session, the general plan for the next workshop was discussed and agreed to.

The basic format of the first workshop was based on a semi-structured facilitation model effective for creative problem-solving and goal setting in groups.<sup>2</sup> The format is:

1. To seek individual views by identifying specific personal encounters which form a collective understanding of a situation or set of conditions or experiences;
2. To identify and prioritise issues that need to be addressed;
3. To discuss the types of skills that may be effective in dealing with the issues raised; and
4. To detail an action plan or agenda for the remaining workshops.

The subsequent sessions are described as training workshops as the focus was on residents participating in skill development. The workshops were based on an interactive learning method which focuses on inquiry and engagement. The main guiding principles are that learning is relational and that understanding is an interactive process. The training workshops involved i) asking participants their own understanding of concepts, values, and situations; ii) exploring how these understandings can be interrelated to their learning goals; iii) drawing from participants own stories, skills, and encouraging their own self-directed learning; iv) connecting these experiences and understandings with other applications involving theories and practices of a particular area of learning and v) applying these new ideas and reflecting on this application individually and collectively.

The other features of each of the training workshops were:

- to begin each session with welcoming everyone back into the space together;
- ask participants to share any reflections, events or considerations that they thought to be helpful or relevant before starting and whether anything had happened between workshops which had activated the learning from the previous workshop; and
- to conclude each session with going around the group asking what each person had learnt from the workshop activities.

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<sup>2</sup> This model is based on David Moore's eloquent finessing of the general sequence of problem-solving methods in the dispute and conflict management literature. See footnote one for greater elaboration of this method.

## **Workshop One**

The first workshop focussed on sourcing the resident's views on particular issues that affected their lives and well being. It was agreed from the outset that experiences shared in all the sessions were confidential. However, before exploring specific stories, the participants were asked to share their expectations in attending the workshop. Each person stated what they hoped to gain from participating in the sessions. Very personal accounts were expressed of the type of goals each person had for themselves and what they'd like to change and improve in their lives. The workshop was seen as an opportunity to:

- face conflict more confidently
- feel less vulnerable
- communicate more effectively
- manage emotions
- deal with abusive situations in the neighbourhood,
- understand how to deal with government departments and other services so that social, housing and other needs are met, and
- learn how to address problems better with family, neighbours and government departments.

The honest and frank goals and hopes shared set the scene for the rest of the workshops. Although there were particular individual expectations that motivated attendance, what developed out of this discussion was also a growing appreciation of what they shared as a group within a community.

The importance of the workshop beginning with expectations is twofold:

- i) to establish an individual and collective purpose for participating in the workshop, and
- ii) to enable the facilitator to identify what they can provide and target the training material according to the group's needs.

The goals were also recorded and incorporated into the minutes the facilitator wrote after each session. These minutes were then presented to the group at the beginning of each workshop and checked for accuracy. They also provided a record of the work participants had engaged in which was encouraging.



The sharing of specific stories highlighting concerns, problems and difficulties faced by individual members, at personal or systemic levels, provided the context by which to outline the general issues of the group and then those to prioritise within the workshops. The other usefulness of these stories is that they provided examples or scenarios to use when exploring skill development in the training workshops through direct role-plays or in group exercises.

Although each person had a unique set of experiences around particular incidents, each person was familiar with the frustrations or responses identified by others. There was an understanding that there were different reactions and approaches taken in times of conflict and different reasons for certain situations arising, however, the group appreciated that there were also many shared concerns that warranted attention.

Three broad categories were identified as areas of concern which required greater understanding, change and skill development:

1. '*The self*' was regarded as a distinct focus and fundamental in working toward change more broadly. Individual tendencies, emotional reactions and actions which can contribute to a situation in a positive or negative way were seen to require greater consideration;
2. '*Personal relationships*' were discussed as an area where poor behaviour and unhelpful patterns occurred and required effective methods to break negative cycles; and
3. '*Systemic issues*' captured a variety of experiences with the Office of Housing or contractors associated with the department, as well as other agencies. As with the other two categories, the specific stories told had highlighted particular actions and patterns which were of concern and warranted improvement.

Each of these headings was listed on a separate sheet of butcher's paper and the group detailed general considerations and options for each area.

Under self and personal relationships the group identified:

- Arguing, clashing, physical and verbal abuse as unhelpful ways of dealing with problems;

- The feelings of frustration, anger and hurt experienced when others 'put them down', deflected or opposed what they said, interrupted them or didn't want to understand their concerns;
- The importance of learning how to communicate constructively and the corresponding appropriate action to take as well as to feel more confident to do so; and
- The significance of appreciating their own strengths and skills and to improve on these.

With systemic issues, the main considerations listed were:

- Being careful with signing any forms that were not understood and which could affect their lives;
- Wanting organisations to use simple and clear language on forms and when speaking to them and not to assume everyone can read or write;
- Learning how to cut through the red tape to know who to ask for help and do so in a way where assistance can be provided rather than the 'stonewalling' or the 'handballing' that occurs with no clear instruction or support from agency staff;
- Knowing more about how the Office of Housing runs its operation in terms of staff availability, policies and practices as inconsistencies in approach, lack of information, and inadequate addressing of issues were raised as sources of frustration;
- Addressing the feeling and experiences of being discriminated against and treated with disrespect because of their disabilities, living in West Heidelberg, or being seen as of a lower social status;
- Understanding how to keep records regarding incidents and specific examples of unsatisfactory treatment by the department, services or contractors so that such information can be useful for follow up as well as informing other residents of problems. Keeping a file on the various departments was said to balance the files kept on residents;
- Assessing (and knowing about) the type of help that can be of assistance from among the different agencies; and
- Feeling confident enough to express their view, present their situation, and take action when required.

Overall, residents hoped that government departments (both at state and federal levels) could operate not 'as a force against you' but in a way that could serve the community.

The first workshop finished with a general agreement for the next meeting to focus on the development of constructive communication skills which could help individuals at a personal level as well as with their relationships and with dealing with various departments.

### ***The training workshops***

At the second workshop the participants were presented with a four page sheet outlining possible communication skills and complementary exercises as well as some insights from the field of conflict management. This training 'manual' was written in simple language taking into account the resident's criticism of information given to them from agencies stated in the first workshop. The overall content was also explained verbally so that participants could identify other areas for skill development and in effect contribute to part of the design of the training.

The overall training in constructive communication skills involved:

1. Identifying the components of good conversation and difficult conversation;
2. Outlining elements of dialogue theory;
3. Discussing the main practices that can aid in effective conversation; and
4. Practising these skills in pairs and with the whole group.

It was also discussed that the main focus of the training was on developing 'self' and 'interpersonal' skills. Although, there were occasions where an incident with the Office of Housing employees or their contractors were used to illustrate the application of a different approach and how this may be of benefit.

In the final workshop, there was a presentation and discussion about three overall approaches to difficult situations and dealing with disputes, conflicts and living in community:

1. How we may *react* to a situation (personal approaches, current dispute and conflict processes);
2. How we may try to *prevent* negative or unhelpful situations arising or minimise them; and

### 3. How we can *promote* different pathways for engagement.

There was also a brief 'negotiation framework' outlined and drawn on the board – a model that can help with preparing for negotiation or be applied during negotiation in order to better understanding a situation and identify how to address it.

Throughout the process of identifying and discussing effective and unhelpful actions, behaviours and approaches, the residents' ideas were captured on the whiteboard or on sheets of butcher's paper under specific titles (i.e. 'good conversations', 'difficult conversations', 'values', 'beliefs', etc). These ideas were then woven into the outlining of the dialogue theory or other frameworks explored. This method served to i) highlight the wealth of knowledge within the group and ii) provide a way of understanding current and general ideas according to particular frameworks of knowledge.

At different times in the workshops, participants also identified 'what they liked to do in the future'. A separate sheet of butcher's paper was put up on the wall to capture these thoughts as they arose. These were incorporated into the workshop minutes which each participant received a copy of for future reference.

At the end of the last workshop, a telephone tree with the numbers of each participant was distributed, a suggestion that had come out of a group discussion. Some participants had identified a sense of isolation. The group was keen to offer themselves to each other as a sounding board or support to each other when they were approaching a situation that might be difficult or give rise to conflict. The session ended with people sharing their thoughts about the workshops and what they liked to do in the future:

- Have more workshops throughout the year;
- Work with specific examples given by the group in further workshops to apply the skills learnt directly to these experiences;
- Follow up with the other 'what we can do' plans as mentioned in previous sessions; and
- Continue to meet or contact each other in the group to support and encourage one another.

The other thoughts expressed were how nice they felt about each other, the level of openness, honesty and support in the group, being treated with respect, and the significance of the friendships subsequently formed.

The time together in the workshops was experienced as 'positive' and 'enriching', a credit to all the residents involved who participated with genuine enthusiasm, care and respect.

### 3. Lesson learnt from workshops

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Each person at the end of the 'training' workshops reflected on what they had learnt from their time together. What follows are the views of residents as they identified them.

From the second workshop some lessons learnt were:

- thinking about past experiences and what role has been played by each person in the family or in a particular relationship;
- the usefulness of understanding the 'moves' that can be made in a conversation and how to improve one's own to communicate more fully and effectively;
- feeling less anxious about how to communicate better; and
- knowing some tools that help with taking steps towards changing habits.

From the third and fourth workshops:

- The importance of asking questions well and not being a 'stand-over';
- Respecting others and learning how to receive respect;
- Realising how much people already know and how the work with the group has helped to reinforce this by revisiting and re-evaluating the values we have;
- Learning how to incorporate into our own life and dealings the values we know to be important to us;
- Understanding how each person can live separate lives and yet when we come together how much potential there is to do more;
- Realising we are not alone in our busy and sometimes isolated lives;
- Learning how to 'do' self-respect;
- Accepting the feeling of happiness, and that one deserves to feel this way and can feel okay about this; and
- Experience the wonder of sharing and being in community with others – and how rich and valuable this is.

Some overall lessons from the workshops were:

1. Ways of speaking more assertively and positively to others so that we can better understand what is important for us and why;
2. Techniques to apply in difficult family situations like thinking before reacting, and trying to either walk away from a negative interaction, or trying to

- approach it by asking open and inquiring questions or acknowledging a person's feelings and being attentive to them;
3. Reminding ourselves of what we value, discussing this with others, and working toward enacting and communicating these values with one's children and in other important personal relationships so that we are living in the way that we think is valuable.
  4. Engaging in discussions to shape the future and how we can do this individually and with others;
  5. Practicing the exercise of just listening because sometimes we get too busy within ourselves or with what we are doing to pay good attention to someone who needs to talk;
  6. Changing negative self-talk that can lead to affecting how we feel by:
    - a. Reminding ourselves of the good things we can do, or what we value, and focusing on these things and not only on what we can't do or don't like;
    - b. Asking others to support us when we are uncertain, doubtful, feeling low;
    - c. Writing a list of our achievements, however great or small, and a list of our goals (what we would like to do, strive for), and remembering to look at this when we need to remind ourselves of our strengths and our hopes
  7. Being able to *receive* help from others as much as being able to *give* help to others; and
  8. Acting in positive ways to acknowledge, thank, support, and be present to our loved ones. Keeping the ratio of when we say good things to people in our lives higher than when we criticize, ignore, or be short tempered with them;

Overall, the residents stated that they had developed a greater awareness by the end of the workshops of how the strength of a community comes from within the community itself and its ability to organise and learn more:

- about it's rights,
- how to approach departments about their policies and approaches, and
- how to support each other when required.

#### 4. Future Directions

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At each workshop a number of possible future plans or action were noted on a separate sheet of paper. Some of these actions are listed under the general

categories identified at the first workshop as they are more specific to issues raised and the skills developed or consolidated in the sessions. Other ideas for future action were expressed and have been listed under recommendations.

***Individual directions and interpersonal plans:***

- When a person feels isolated they should make contact with other residents – drawing from the phone list as well as organising a bigger one with others. Ringing another resident when a person wanted help with agency workers or other service delivery personnel to minimise feeling vulnerable was also identified as an important action to take;
- Two participants of the workshop, and perhaps others, planned to get together to talk about what they learnt from the workshops and how they could apply this to run their own workshops with the community; and
- Setting up a practice/support group so that residents in the workshops can practice how to say what they need to say to others and get feedback.

***Systemic approaches:***

- When a resident does not get a helpful response from the Department or Office of Housing, seek advice from other residents, the legal service, or some other service at the centre as to who may be the best person to talk with next;
- Seeking more assistance from the WHLCS and other specialist legal services if residents require legal advice or want to take a class action on some issue if other avenues have been unsuccessful;
- When promises are made by politicians or agency workers, keep a note of these, including phone conversations or other material given and then use this information to follow up if the promises are not kept;
- When asked to sign off on a job undertaken at one's place of residency, not to do so unless the resident understands what has been done or is happy with the job;
- If applicable, source information from a department by accessing it through Freedom of Information – or ask for assistance in doing this;
- Request for more research and accountability within government departments and agencies so that services can be improved, and that useful and beneficial services are provided.
- More advocacy skills development so that community members are better able to negotiate that money and resources go into the right areas fulfilling the needs of the community and in order that their experiences, concerns and suggestions for improvement can be heard; and
- Lobby for interpersonal training skills for service providers, especially when working with people with disabilities.

A high priority for residents was being provided with a space and, at times, assistance for community members to draw on in order to have useful discussions

about their pressing issues and to proactively prevent problems escalating, to have them addressed comprehensively, and to promote community engagement and responsibility. Knowing which agencies could be supportive in such an enterprise was also stated as being beneficial for moving ahead. Future action included opportunities for promoting greater constructive communication among community members and between social agencies.

As expressed above by the residents, further training workshops are required and viewed as contributing to developing the skills they had acquired and supporting them in their efforts to act more proactively to reduce and address conflicts that may arise in the community and at various levels – individually, interpersonally and systemically.

## **5. Recommendations**

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There were a number of ideas that came from the residents at the workshop as well as from the initial grant application that are worth pursuing further and are recommended:

1. Complete the overall aims of the project by:
  - conducting similar workshops with the Office of Housing workers which first identify some of the issues they face in their roles and why, and second, then the outline the types of skills that they may require to address these issues and to be able to better respond to community members, and
  - bringing together these workers and the residents for a joint facilitated session. At this session the aim would be to collectively explore the issues raised for each group of people and to explore possible ways forward to improving their relationship. Funding would be required to undertake these stages;
2. Source further funding for the West Heidelberg Community Legal Centre to run further workshops on human rights and other issues that help residents know more about what they can do about legal and social problems;



3. Explore how Community Legal Services could provide for conflict management workshops as part of their community development objective as well as identifying other services that can help resolve conflicts and disputes between community members. Legal services with properly trained staff may be able to provide the space and facilitation methods to both prevent disagreements from escalating and help resolve disputes and conflicts;
4. Discuss with local councils how they could also support legal services in this initiative of community development by providing grants for this type of project such as Banyule Council did for West Heidelberg Community Legal Service;
5. Contact the Justice Department and discuss whether they can play a role in further funding the roll out of a conflict management program which involves other social services partaking in workshops and facilitated discussions with community groups; and
6. Seek ways to encourage government agencies to include more consumers or community members on their boards and working in their services in paid positions and/or be funded to receive training and supervision.

## 6. Concluding comments

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The workshops achieved the overall goal of the 'Creating Right Spaces' project: of benefiting people with the least access to justice and community development to voice their concerns and learn some skills that could be helpful to them. This was achieved on a small scale and yet this project demonstrates how beneficial such a program can be as well as the importance of it being a continuing project. "One off" funding misses the opportunity for ongoing recurrent work. Continued support is necessary if any real gains are to be made to ensure behaviour change and ongoing skills development and to ensure that the work can transcend often fixed negative patterns of behaviour and give people the capacity to generate real, long lasting and sustainable positive change.

The extraordinary richness of the interactions that arose in the workshops occurred not just from the stories shared and the skills learnt together but, in the words of the residents, from the growing awareness of how the strength of a community comes from within the community itself and its ability to organise, support and

respect its members as well as learn more about creating better relationship and engagements. There was individual and collective growth which involved rekindling a sense of being worthy of happiness, opportunities, and a better future – and this happened because the group itself supported each person to take risks, acknowledged each other's strengths and weaknesses, and demonstrated honesty, respect and gratitude.

## Appendix

### Flyer to attract participants to the Workshops

#### *Workshops for Residents in West Heidelberg Public Housing*

The West Heidelberg Community Legal Service would like to invite 12 to 14 people (maximum) to be a part of three workshops in April 2010 that will focus on what residents of public housing think are some pressing issues of concern for them and then explore ways of effectively dealing with such issues. Participants **MUST** be able to attend all workshops as they will build on each other. It is important to attend all sessions to allow the group to build a level of trust with each other in order to participate in the activities of the workshop.

**Workshop 1:** a facilitated discussion about what residents consider to be the major issues that affect their lives and well being and what services or groups have helped them to work through these issues or not. We will also explore whether some approaches have been more helpful than others and why.

**Workshop 2 and 3:** building on and informed by the first workshop we will work at developing different skills to better manage problems that have and might arise again. Skills that will be the focus are:

- Communicating effectively,
- Understanding different ways to deal with problems.
- Learning about dispute and conflict processes like mediation and conferencing and how they work and having a go at being involved in them.
- Identifying which social services can provide assistance with particular problems and how to tackle approaching them to get a better result.

There will also be the chance to discuss other skills that you might like to learn more about and that are within the expertise of the facilitator.

The aims of the workshops are to identify important issues that affect residents' lives as members of a housing estate and as a part of the broader community and to develop constructive and effective approaches to dealing with these issues. The overall goal is to encourage and support dialogue, conflict resolution and, ultimately, better relationships within the community.

Alikki Vernon will facilitate all of the workshops. Alikki works as a conflict resolution practitioner and teaches in this area at La Trobe University and has experience training local community groups and other organisations.

**When and Where:** Workshop times are: Light refreshments are provided.