

OWCH (OLDER WOMEN'S COHOUSING) COMPANY LTD

CONFLICT RESOLUTION POLICY

(Agreed 5 July 2011)

Mutual respect and care for each other provides an essential underpinning for life in a CoHousing Community. Kindness, generosity and tolerance help to keep it a positive experience. There is no point in living together as a group if individual members do not aspire to the highest standards of behaviour in their interactions with each other. This said, we are all human - and imperfect communication, personal stress and inevitable personality differences can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between the best motivated people. The key feature of a CoHousing group is that there is a genuine collective willingness to address and resolve conflict.

The OWCH group needs to have a policy and an agreed procedure to resolve conflicts when they occur so that they don't damage the life of the group. Individual members have a collective responsibility for supporting the policy and implementing the procedures. Issues and problems not dealt with satisfactorily as soon as possible can become entrenched. However, it should be recognised that some types of conflict cannot be resolved but may need to be tolerated and lived with. With a basis of goodwill, this should be possible.

We anticipate that problems may arise at two levels – between individual OWCH women and within the group as a whole – and there may be a spillover between both. However, difficulties between individuals need not and should not without good reason become a matter for the group as a whole. The following policy and procedures have been agreed therefore by the group and individual members are expected to conform to them.

1. INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS POLICY

1. Where difficulties arise between OWCH members, the individuals concerned are responsible for taking action as soon as possible to resolve these with each other in a spirit of openness and honesty.
2. If a conflict cannot be resolved directly by the women concerned, they should follow the procedures recommended below.

RECOMMENDED PROCEDURES FOR ADDRESSING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

1. Where an issue or problem arises that causes distress and difficulty between individual members of the group, they should acknowledge it and seek to address it without undue delay. There are basic principles of co-

counselling which are helpful in this process. These are:

Agree to a quiet meeting place and give each other space to listen to one another for up to fifteen minutes each without interruption except to clarify a point.

Use the time to focus on the other rather than prepare an argument or defence of yourself; really consider what is being said and how you may not have taken this fully into account earlier.

Be aware of your own feelings and those of the other person. Hear painful emotions and don't avoid them.

Where possible, focus on the *issues* that divide you rather than personalise the conflict

Aim for mutual tolerance and respect even if you have to 'agree to disagree'

2. Where a conflict cannot be resolved by the women concerned, they should seek the help of others to resolve it. They can each ask a woman, whom they trust and who they believe can be objective, to support, clarify and help to disentangle muddled feelings.

3. A role-play (to demonstrate the conflict to an audience) and a *reverse* role-play can be very helpful to the understanding of each other. Individual members may request assistance from the group in facilitating this.

4. The possibility of obtaining the services of a trained external mediator offers a further option. The group will maintain a small fund for such purposes and the finance committee is responsible for approving use of it.

5. If after these procedures have been exhausted, conflict is unresolvable *and* is seriously damaging the communal life of the group, it may be that one or more members may be asked to withdraw from the CoHousing Community. In such a case, the group should take responsibility for the welfare of the departing member and take reasonable steps to ease the difficult process of withdrawal.

2. CONFLICT RESOLUTION WITHIN THE GROUP AS A WHOLE POLICY

1. OWCH members have a collective responsibility for addressing and taking swift action to resolve conflicts which may emerge between different bodies of opinion within the group.

2. In such cases, OWCH rules regarding consensus decision-making should be operated in the first instance. If these are insufficient, recourse must be had to procedures such as those outlined below.

PROCEDURES FOR RESOLVING CONFLICTS WITHIN THE GROUP AS A WHOLE

1. Key decisions in the OWCH group are agreed through a process of

consensus building based on every member having a say and full and open exploration of dissent. There is provision, where time is running out, for a majority vote in the absence of full agreement. Serious divisions of opinion or conflicts between factions in the group are not ideally resolved through a voting mechanism.

2. Where the group is split and progress to a resolution appears to be blocked, there is a group responsibility for addressing the conflict immediately or as soon as possible, abandoning its programme if necessary. Inaction is not an option.

3. Various methods exist to deal with conflict, for example:

- **Negotiation:** groups representing conflicting bodies of opinion repair to separate meeting space; mediators acting as emissaries between the different groups establish the facts as seen by each and explore what grounds each may be prepared to compromise on and what is non-negotiable. The emissaries then draw up draft plans or agreements that bring together the compromises and trade them against the non-negotiable in a way that becomes gradually acceptable to both groups until a final compromise/agreement is reached.

- **Debate:** (can be formally staged with audience or role-play inside a circle or 'fishbowl'). Two women are elected or volunteer to speak for each 'side'. Each pair has 10 minutes of uninterrupted time to put their case. Then each pair has the same time to question each other, again with no interruptions from the main group. Questions are then invited from the main group for 20 minutes. Finally, the group is called upon to agree a consensus.

4. If the group is still unable to resolve a conflict, the services of a trained external mediator must be sought to assist the group. The group must maintain a small fund to provide for such an eventuality.