Stop. Talk. Listen.
Challenging the Culture of Conflict
The Fifth Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution Conference

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Last year just under 5,000 young people became homeless in Scotland due to family relationship breakdown (Scottish Government 2014).

The Cyrenians Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution (SCCR) is a national resource centre promoting and supporting best practice in mediation, family conflict resolution and early intervention. The SCCR aims to improve relationships and so improve lives.

In February 2015 the SCCR held its fifth national conference, where high-profile speakers and delegates came together to consider the culture of conflict in Scottish society and the impact it has on young people, families and communities. Although not all of the content of the speakers has been covered in depth, this report highlights some of the key themes and considerations for making Scotland the best place to grow up.

Drew Drummond, Patron of the Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution (SCCR), welcomed everyone to the conference. He highlighted the work
completed by the SCCR since its launch in 2014 and reflected on the impact and national significance of the Centre. The conference saw speakers and delegates reflect on the future of the SCCR, and hold discussion around the culture of conflict within Scottish society and the impact it has on young people, their families and wider problems in the fields of homelessness, criminal justice and health. Ewan Aitken (CEO Cyrenians) opened the conference:

We cannot wait one minute longer to address the pervasive problem of conflict in Scottish society. Every year thousands of young people become homeless, their life chances left in tatters, because of family breakdown, while many other parents and young people struggle behind closed doors …

One in four young people think about running away from home each month because of arguments. A third of parents argue with their teenagers weekly. We cannot afford as a nation to hide from the impact of conflict. (Aitken 2015)

Difficulties in family relationships can often begin much earlier than the teenage years. In his keynote address, Sir Harry Burns, professor of Global Public Health, (University of Strathclyde) discussed the importance of healthy brain development and its role in managing conflict and relationships. He explained:

High levels of stress and anxiety while growing up can result in increased activity in the fight/flight part of the brain and in reduced cell growth in the part of the brain responsible for suppressing inappropriate behaviour. This can result in increased emotional lability, anxiety and aggression. (Burns 2015)

In describing ‘the molecular biology of a hug’, he emphasised that serotonin is needed for the development of our cognitive processes and stressed the importance of feeling nurtured: ‘If alienation is the problem, then inclusion, care, compassion, and bringing people together is the solution’ (Burns 2015).

Conflict is a part of our lives, but it isn’t easy. It can be destructive. However, when managed in a positive way, conflict can lead to meaningful change in our relationships and lives. James Wolffe, QC (Dean, Faculty of Advocates) discussed the financial and human cost of conflict and how
we go about managing difficult situations in our lives:

Conflict is part of the human condition and our disagreements are a natural result of our diversity. Drawing from his own experience, he suggested that in resolving conflict it is necessary to face up to the fact and nature of conflict, and to give those a chance to articulate their point of view and to feel that they have been heard fairly. In supporting the aims of the SCCR, he observed that success in managing conflict is not only about the outcome, but also about the process: how people foster a better understanding and reach mutual agreements. (Wolffe 2015)

In her conference address, Margaret Burgess, (MSP, Minister for Housing and Welfare) emphasised the importance of early intervention and support for young people and their families in regards to their relationships:

Since 2010 homelessness in Scotland has been falling, including among young people. However, young people remain at around a third of all homelessness applications, relationship breakdown with family and friends being the main reason.

We know that homelessness amongst young people can not only be damaging in the short term, but the implications of the experience can last for years. Re-building relationships can be a vital step in building a more secure future.

A focus on homelessness prevention in recent years, developed through the housing options approach, has led to a renewed interest in the role of mediation services.

This is why the Scottish Government has acknowledged that the time was right to fund a national initiative like SCCR, which encompasses this approach. (Burgess 2015)

Kate Polson (CEO, The Rock Trust) also emphasised the importance of early intervention and the role of mediation and support service provision. She also stressed the importance of relationships for young people and that ‘a lack of positive social networks increases the chance of homelessness’. Social Networks can be key for young people to avoid homelessness or work towards a life where they are no longer homelessness (Polson 2015).

Sometimes people will need some one-to-one support with their relationships. Part of the SCCR’s work is providing people with information
about mediation services. Dr Rein Sikveland shared the research led by Professor Elizabeth Stokoe around positive language that mediation services can use to engage with clients:

The first challenge for mediation services is to explain what mediation is, while being prepared to deal with resistance. Dr Sikveland’s talk demonstrated that it is easier for a client to resist mediation when presented with ideological representations of mediation (such as ‘it’s voluntary’ and ‘we’re impartial’) compared to more process-oriented explanations. Also, particular ways of recruiting the caller’s moral character is highly effective in dealing with resistance from the caller.

This was also a taster of CARM (‘Conversation Analytic Roleplay Method’). CARM uses recordings of actual encounters to form evidence of best practice in different sorts of workplace encounters. (Sikveland 2015)

The SCCR recognises that challenging the culture of conflict is not just about the way we manage our family relationships. We need to look also to our wider communities. Dr Duncan Morrow (University of Ulster) discussed the bigger picture of conflict – how we must challenge the existing culture of understanding and managing conflict. Dr Morrow suggested we must offer people different realities, new opportunities and other possibilities. We need to give people hope that there are different ways of managing and responding to conflict in their lives. Dr Morrow emphasised that ‘relatedness is critical to the wellbeing of society and its regeneration’ (Morrow 2015).

Conflict is part of our lives, and the culture we live in. If it becomes destructive it can have a lasting impact on our health, wellbeing, work, friends, families and our communities. A key theme from the Conference was the fundamental importance of relationships, and their role in managing conflict. Positive strong relationships are the building blocks for improving the lives of young people and families.

Concluding remarks invited the delegates to reflect on what they could do as individuals – and what we can do collectively – to bring about a lasting cultural change in the way we manage conflict and continue on this journey collaboratively – truly making Scotland the best place to grow up.
Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution impact reports can be found at http://scottishconflictresolution.org.uk/professionals-and-practitioners/statistics.
3 Information regarding mediation and support services for young people and their families in Scotland that are free at the point of use can be accessed at http://scottishconflictresolution.org.uk/map.
4 See www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/socialsciences/staff/academicandresearch/stokoe-elizabeth.html.
5 For further information regarding the CARM (‘conversation analytic role-play method’) see www.carmtraining.org.

Bibliography


