

## **Address to Newham Conflict and Change - Its role for the next 20 years September 17th 2004**

It is a great pleasure to be here today to celebrate and reflect on the work done by Conflict and Change over the last 20 years. Every area in the world experiences conflict, but it is so encouraging to see a team of such dedicated people working together so that our diverse community here in Newham can be enriched and empowered by its differences and not brought down by the issues that divide us.

I am always encouraged when I visit the schools in my constituency to see students from such a wide range of backgrounds working and playing together. It is in this environment that the children in Newham will learn to value and respect one another's differences. Conflict and Change's work has clearly made an invaluable contribution in this area since it began its schools work 12 years ago and I hope to see this work continue over the next twenty years. The children in Newham have the unique opportunity of growing up in diverse communities and therefore learning to build bridges and understanding rather than creating a culture of intolerance.

When disputes and conflicts arise in our communities and homes a resolution can seem impossible. That is why Conflict and Change's community and domestic mediation programs are such an important service to Newham. The mediators are able to step in a gap, encourage positive discussion and help people, whether they are neighbours or family members, to understand and listen to one another. In twenty years time, sadly there will still be rifts within our community but I hope that Conflict and Change will still be offering this channel to bring a positive resolution to these disputes.

Not only do we live in a diverse community but we live in one that is constantly changing and developing. One such area has been the development of the Thames Gateway. While this has been a great opportunity for creating jobs and regeneration it has also led to tensions between the older communities in Newham and the individuals and companies moving into the area. I know that this is an area that Conflict and Change are already working in, and I believe that they will continue to have an important role here as East London develops over the next twenty years.

Another area of change in the nature of conflicts in our communities has been global developments over the last three years which have clearly had an impact on our communities here in Newham. Since September 11 Muslims have been demonised by the media and it is key that we prevent these prejudices from destroying relationships in our own communities. I have been so encouraged to see Conflict and Change adjusting to this new challenge by linking their work to the international situation. To build trust and understanding between our communities even when tensions are high in the rest of the world may be one of the greatest challenges we'll face over the coming years.

It is because Conflict and Change has been flexible and reactive that it has been able to address these matters. This is what makes the organisation relevant and valuable, and which will allow them to continue being a force for change over the next twenty years.