

Exploration of local variations in the use of anti-social behaviour tools and powers

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This study examined the differences and similarities between Crime and Disorder Partnerships (CDRPs) in their use of anti-social behaviour (ASB) interventions, focusing on their experiences of the process of: implementing interventions; local and national influences; and the perceived effectiveness of interventions. The information was collected through an online survey of ASB co-ordinators in CDRPs and a series of focus groups with ASB practitioners in local areas conducted by Ipsos MORI.

Perceptions and the local agenda

The research highlighted the key part played by the local community in setting the agenda for ASB interventions, illustrating the need for local agencies to inform communities about what is being done locally in tackling ASB and for the Home Office to address perceptions of levels of ASB – the Home Office is working with some local areas to draw out promising approaches in informing communities about action to tackle ASB.

The use of tools and powers

Most practitioners felt content with, and well-informed about, the range of powers available to them, although some saw a need for an intervention that ‘bridged the gap’ between the non-compulsion of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) and the strictures of ASBOs. But practitioners mostly wanted a consolidation of the Government’s approach, with an indication of the future policy direction.

Practitioners commonly reported a tiered approach to implementing interventions to tackle ASB, with an initial focus on preventative, supportive interventions, working up to a multi-agency enforcement approach.

The areas involved in the research used an array of supportive interventions, but there were concerns about the accessibility of support services for adults.

Partnership working and information sharing

While practitioners valued local flexibility, they saw national sharing of good practice as key to ensuring that good and innovative work that is being carried out across the country is used to inform policy and practice developments. Some practitioners thought that an effective practice guide illustrating a range of case study examples would be a useful tool to front-line staff, while others pressed for guidelines to assist them in making informed decisions about how to most effectively use the interventions.

Multi-agency working was seen as vital for dealing effectively with ASB, but barriers to the sharing of information were reported, in particular between statutory and non-statutory bodies. Some practitioners wanted guidelines on information-sharing protocols and establishing effective partnerships, especially with those agencies currently outside of many ASB partnerships.

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Keywords

Anti-social behaviour
Intervention
Social policy
Local areas
Disorder

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Introduction

The study explores local variations in the use of tools and powers, provides information about the local processes which underpin the use of these powers and begins to build a picture of how interventions are being used in local areas. The key aim of this research is to examine reasons for local variation in the use of ASB interventions, focusing particularly on Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts.

Methods

The research design encompasses both quantitative and qualitative approaches, both elements carried out by Ipsos MORI between February and May 2008. The research was focused on practitioners who dealt with issues on the ground, rather than on higher level strategic decision-making executives. There was an online survey of ASB co-ordinators in all CDRPs to find out how they viewed their role and how they used ASB interventions in the local area. There were 230 responses, representing a response rate of 61 per cent. There were focus groups in eight diverse areas. The groups were made up from a range of ASB practitioners within the area.

Findings

1. Local anti-social behaviour problems

- The areas responding to the survey had different reported levels of ASB with a different mix of problems. In nearly all areas teenagers hanging around were seen as the most prevalent problem and alcohol was identified as fuelling a range of anti-social and criminal behaviour.
- The role of local people and community groups was considered by practitioners to be important in defining the particular anti-social behaviours that

were a priority in their area. However, practitioners also felt that the level of public concern about ASB was generally high compared with the actual incidences of behaviour locally.

- Although young people were generally seen as the main perpetrators, some adults were persistent in their ASB. Some of these adult perpetrators were seen as vulnerable with mental health or other issues; others were viewed less sympathetically with their behaviour fuelled by recreational drinking and drug use.
- There were differences in the perceptions of the amount and types of ASB amongst CDRPs and within CDRPs. Whilst many ASB behaviours were common across all CDRPs, certain areas had 'hotspots' with a concentration of behaviours apparently because of their demographic make-up or level of urbanisation or deprivation.

2. Interventions: use and selection

- Co-ordinators were generally well informed about the whole range of interventions available to them. Some interventions – warning letters, ABCs and ASBOs – were used in nearly all areas.
- There is evidence from the survey that those areas where co-ordinators had perceptions of a high level of ASB and where there were high levels of deprivation were also those areas where a wide range of interventions were used.
- Interventions for ASB were seen as acting as a gateway to other services in all the CDRPs, with support services being most used with young people. Practitioners differentiated between the availability and use of support measures for adults and younger people. Most practitioners felt that adults have fewer options for support available to them than their younger counterparts.

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- Two of the most commonly used interventions, ASBOs and ABCs, were generally used for different behaviours, with ABCs nearly always used for young people and ASBOs most likely to be used for adults.
- In deciding on interventions, the nature and extent of the ASB was considered important by all co-ordinators, with the nature of the complaints, local standards and public concern being considered important by more people than national standards and the political agenda.
- Practitioners in some areas tended to consider the severity of the behaviour and its impact on the community in deciding on the intervention; in other areas there was more emphasis on the needs of the perpetrator.
- In most CDRPs there appears to be a tendency to use more low-level, preventative and support measures with children and young people. However, there were also examples of the needs of adults being taken into account in the carrying out of the interventions
- The majority of respondents felt the interventions that they used were effective in successfully addressing ASB. Lower-level interventions, such as warning letters, were felt to be most effective.
- The use of more punitive measures was seen as a multi-agency decision and a variety of agencies (sometimes as well as residents through the use of residents' diaries) would be involved in putting together the evidence package that would make up the application for tools such as ASBOs to be implemented.
- Information sharing was consistently seen as key to multi-agency working and successfully tackling ASB. For all CDRPs involved in the discussion groups, building up a body of knowledge relating to the perpetrator was important in delivering appropriate interventions, although there were some issues raised about data protection.
- There were concerns among some practitioners that the Government was not taking into account their views in developing policy and that the current implementation of policy was 'top-down'.
- Just over a half of co-ordinators thought that their approach to ASB differed from other CDRPs. They generally put this down to ways of working and differences in the characteristics of the area.

3. Interventions; approach and delivery

- Most areas adopted a 'tiered' approach to tackling ASB in which the severity of interventions and the number of agencies involved increased in line with the seriousness of the behaviour and the number of incidents. There were some variations between locations in the degree of prevention used prior to enforcement.
- Co-ordinators generally felt that the purpose of ASB interventions was to prevent and protect, with many practitioners in the discussion groups gauging the success of an intervention by the satisfaction of the victim or complainant and whether the community felt safer.
- Working in partnership with others was considered crucial to the work of ASB co-ordinators. The police, housing and local authorities were seen as key players in the decision-making process and the delivery of ASB interventions.

Conclusions

This study has shown that there were variations in the use of tools and powers by different CDRPs. Practitioners felt that these variations were driven by differences between areas both in levels and types of ASB experienced, and in ways that ASB interventions were delivered (the latter sometimes reflecting variations between areas in structures for multi-agency working). There was a clear relationship between levels of use of interventions and the perceived levels of ASB in the areas.

But despite the variations in the use of tools and powers by different CDRPs, most areas had a generally similar underlying way of working that can be characterised as a tiered approach to using interventions, with an initial focus on preventative, supportive interventions, working up to a multi-agency enforcement approach.

'Top-down' support from the Government was seen as very important, particularly in addressing issues of information sharing and disseminating good practice, but practitioners strongly supported the flexibility to pursue locally-determined agendas on ASB.