

**DEALING WITH ANTI-SOCIAL
BEHAVIOUR: THE ISSUE OF THE
MULTI-AGENCY APPROACH**

Poster Presentation

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[Note from the Editor:

Part of the assessed work for Criminology and Criminal Justice students who undertake work based learning as part of their final year studies is a poster presentation. The students submit their posters together with a brief overview of their time in placement and the issues that they found particularly interesting. Amy Carter undertook her placement with the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit in Plymouth. Her poster examines the issue of multi-agency working in relation to the work of the unit.]

During my final year of study I undertook an 80 hour placement with Plymouth's Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (ASBU) as part of the Criminology and Criminal Justice degree programme. During my time there I observed court hearings, multi-agency meetings and shadowed visits to victims of anti-social behaviour (ASB). I spent the majority of my time with an ASB Officer who chaired multi-agency meetings, where other agencies would gather such as Education Welfare, Youth Offending Service, Police and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs).

I found these meetings of particular interest as they act as part of an escalation process, where the perpetrator's needs and behaviour are considered alongside the need to protect the public from further '...harassment, alarm or distress' as outlined in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. After attending several of these meetings, I found there were a number of issues with using a multi-agency approach. Poor communication between agencies and a lack of understanding about what ASB is were common problems. Anti-social behaviour is managed under civil law; however many agencies thought that ASB was a criminal matter and misunderstood which behaviours constituted ASB.

Defining ASB is difficult, however it is generally believed that it covers a wide range of behaviours, and is thought to lie somewhere between 'the mildly annoying' and the 'seriously criminal' (Millie, 2009:3). The ASBU have recently provided specific training on ASB for PCSOs and Housing Officers to inform them of the powers and tools that can be used against a perpetrator committing ASB. Similarly, a lack of attendance and preparation prior to meetings was also an issue which hindered effective communication between agencies. I found this inhibited the progression of the meeting and the identification of the ASB to be managed, which could have a negative effect on both the perpetrator who needs help, but also the victims who are exposed to ASB.

The final issue with multi-agency meetings is that there were conflicts of interest, as each agency appeared to be working towards its own agenda. In particular I noticed that a police officer or PCSO would often lead the discussion, because they had the most background information on the perpetrator. This can lead to a biased view of how the perpetrator's behaviour should be managed, and can result in 'police take-over' whereby '... police get other agencies to pursue police-defined goals and objectives, rather than engaging in inter-agency work in the spirit of mutual consultation and shared agreement' (Sampson *et al.*, 1988:479-480).

Although multi-agency approaches may be flawed, this is not inherent in all meetings or across all organisations, and it needs to be noted that effective relationships between agencies may take time to develop (Liddle & Gelsthorpe, 1994). Since working with the ASBU, I have developed an interest for working with victims of ASB and I would highly recommend students undertake this module, as it has enriched my knowledge in the field of ASB and has given me a unique insight into how ASB is dealt with and the people it affects.

References

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Millie, A. (2009) *Anti-Social Behaviour*, Open University Press: Berkshire

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DEALING WITH ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR: THE ISSUE OF THE MULTI-AGENCY APPROACH

What do we mean by anti-social behaviour?

As defined by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, anti-social behaviour is committed by someone who has acted in a "... manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same household as himself".

> It is a civil matter, NOT criminal!



What does the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit do?

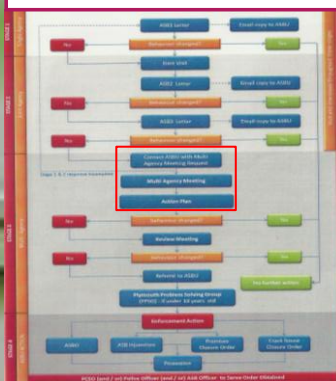
The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit aims to find solutions to tackle anti-social behaviour, and engage with individuals to modify their behaviour within a multi-agency, problem-solving context (Plymouth City Council, 2012a).

How is this achieved?

- An agency will refer a case to the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit.
- The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit will call for a multi-agency meeting to be held, and invite all the relevant agencies.
- Meetings are chaired by the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit, where several agencies gather in one place to discuss the behaviour of the perpetrator, and how to deal with it in a way which considers the perpetrators needs, but also protects the public from further harm.
- The agencies should come to an agreement and create a plan of action. This may mean enforcement action may need to be taken or the case may be dismissed, but the agencies should continue monitoring the perpetrator's situation.

In context: the escalation process and multi-agency meetings

The flow-diagram below shows the escalation process which agencies must use when tackling anti-social behaviour. The area highlighted in red shows the point at which the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit becomes involved. This only occurs after three warning letters have been issued and the perpetrator has been made aware on several occasions that their behaviour is unacceptable. (Diagram: Plymouth City Council, 2012b)



The diagram to the right demonstrates the structure of how agencies come together to form inter-agency relations.

In theory:

- They should bring their **individual expertise** to the meeting
- They should combine their knowledge and experience to **come to an agreement**
- They should **form a solid structure** where information can filter up and down through the agencies (Lisak & Gelshtorpe, 1994).

Problems with multi-agency meetings

- Poor communication between agencies
- Coming unprepared for meetings
- Lack of attendance
- Lengthy escalation process
- Conflicting interests and biased opinions
- Confusion about what anti-social behaviour is

Multi-agency meetings aren't all bad, are they?

- Every agency and Anti-Social Behaviour Unit are different, so some will take more time than others to develop a relationship where there is effective communication (Lisak & Gelshtorpe, 1994).
- Agencies are beginning to receive specific training on anti-social behaviour, and the tools and powers at their disposal to deal with it, so they have a greater understanding and are better equipped to deal with it.
- Avoids duplication of work, which wastes time, money and resources – so multi-agency approaches are more efficient! (Stanley et al., 2003:33).
- If the perpetrator continues to commit anti-social behaviour after the first multi-agency meeting, another meeting can be held to review the case and, if necessary, refer the case to the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit so they can take enforcement action against the perpetrator. So there is a back-up plan! (Plymouth City Council, 2012b).
- Working with a multitude of agencies can mean that the causes of the anti-social behaviour can be dealt with more effectively, so the perpetrator is less likely to reoffend!

What can we conclude?

Multi-dimensional problems need multi-agency solutions!

Although multi-agency approaches for dealing with anti-social behaviour may be flawed, this is not inherent in all meetings or across all organisations, and effective relationships between agencies may take time to develop (Lisak & Gelshtorpe, 1994).

Therefore, despite the issues some agencies may face by using multi-agency approaches, it still remains the most effective method of dealing with multi-faceted issues like anti-social behaviour' (Sampson et al., 1998).

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