

Taking a Stand

Louise Casey explains the Government's position on ASBOs.

We were clear from the start of our drive against anti-social behaviour that it was something we would no longer tolerate. In his introduction to *Respect and Responsibility*, the Home Office's White Paper on the subject (published in March 2003), the Home Secretary David Blunkett said: "It's time to stop thinking of anti-social behaviour as something that we can just ignore."

Eighteen months on, and that sentiment is still at the forefront of everything we do. The unit I head, based in the Home Office, produced the White Paper and has helped put the *Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003* through Parliament, giving dozens of new powers to front-line workers and making current ones more effective.

We've also launched the TOGETHER campaign and held a series of academies across the country explaining the new powers to those who will use them and how we will support them in doing so. A new ActionLine is in place – 0870 220 2000 – making sure that front-line practitioners have the help and support they need to turn the words of legislation into action on the ground.

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Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), are just one example of our action. Introduced in the *1998 Crime and Disorder Act*, ASBOs were poorly used at first because practitioners thought they were too cumbersome. We listened to their views and have made them more flexible and workable. Since then their use has increased markedly. The new Act also extends their use so that Housing Action Trusts and County Councils can apply for them on the same basis as Registered Social Landlords and the British Transport Police. Local authorities are also now able to prosecute breaches of ASBOs where they were the applicant agency or where the individual concerned lives in their area.

Importantly, the changes are making a real difference in communities across the country. Nearly 2,500 ASBOs have been given out – in Greater Manchester alone there are 412, according to a recent Home Office study. The majority of these have been issued since our reforms to make them more workable.

Critics say ASBOs are too draconian. They are not. They are a proportionate response to a problem and if the individual concerned behaves no further

action is required. There are also clear, positive impacts on communities where ASBOs are used.

First, those people who have had their lives blighted by the anti-social behaviour see an immediate impact with their tormentors banned from certain areas. It shows that the authorities are on their side and action is being taken against their problems.

Second, it gives the police and local authorities the power to intervene if further trouble occurs. The Magistrates Association issued guidance in the New Year saying custodial sentences should be considered for breaches. With this enforcement option in place, there is a strong incentive for the individual concerned to comply with the order and around two-thirds of people do stick to the terms of their order.

Third, an order can also be a spur to help and support for struggling families or individuals. I know of cases where Social Services have been made aware of, and become involved with an individual, solely because they were about to face enforcement action.

Examples of effective uses of ASBOs can be found daily in the media. For example, in Eastbourne two brothers who – in the words of the council's anti-social behaviour co-ordinator – 'caused havoc' were

barred from parts of the town and given curfews. In Oldham, a 16-year-old who has harassed residents for five years was stopped from walking the streets where he caused misery, and in Cheshire a teenage girl has been banned from carrying a hammer, golf club or any other weapon because of the offences she had committed before.

In every community across England and Wales, there are many more examples of ASBOs helping embattled people to regain their confidence and reduce their fear of crime.

But ASBOs are not the answer to every ill. Indeed, they are a severe penalty which in many cases should be a last resort. The 2003 Act takes a twin-track approach of enforcement and support in tackling anti-social behaviour.

If we are to create a sustainable change in our communities we need to once again engender respect for each other. Parents have a crucial role here in teaching young people the difference between right and wrong and the Act offers struggling families several avenues of support.

For example, parenting contracts offer families the opportunity to work voluntarily with agencies to



Louise Casey(right) with Sue Strickland, Anti-Social Behaviour Manager, Bristol City Council at the TOGETHER Bristol event.

improve the behaviour of their child. They are a two-way process, with the family at the centre of deciding what action is appropriate. The Government expects parents to engage with this process and grasp the chance to nip a problem in the bud before it becomes a major issue. If they fail in this a parenting order — a compulsory court appointed order — could be handed down. These are a final chance and require parents to cooperate or face a possible £1,000 fine.

The Government is prepared to help families who want to change their behaviour or that of their children. If anti-social behaviour affects the wider community we will act. As a Government we have a duty to be on the side of, and help, the law-abiding majority.

Tackling anti-social behaviour is something we must all take on. Public services cannot respond to communities if the residents don't tell them what problems are affecting them. People whose lives are blighted by anti-social behaviour will not see a difference unless they take on the challenge of tackling the problem. And local agencies need to respond — using the powers and resources available to them.

I admit it takes courage to stand up to the nuisance neighbour or the intimidating group of people on the street corner. But it can be done — the winners from our Taking a Stand Awards are evidence of this.

The job of my unit is to support those on the front-

line who are fighting anti-social behaviour day in, day out. Through our TOGETHER campaign we are giving these people the tools they need to combat anti-social behaviour effectively by supporting them and sharing best practice across the country. The campaign is also giving people in communities across the country the confidence to confront those making their lives a misery. They know that if they turn to the authorities for help, it will be forthcoming.

This change of attitude is a significant development, which is reducing crime and the fear of it: according to the latest British Crime Survey the number of people perceiving a high level of disorder in their local area has fallen from 21 to 16 per cent. Other indicators of anti-social behaviour — such as levels of worry about vandalism, teenagers hanging around and people being drunk — have also all dropped significantly.

Maintaining this success is the challenge we now face. The Home Secretary, Ministers and my unit will continue to work with the same zeal as we have already done. By doing so we will make sure the Home Secretary's words in the White Paper are fulfilled.

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