

Concern over ASBOs

The escalation in the use of anti-social behaviour orders in the implementation of the *Police Reform Act 2002* and the *Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003* has led many probation, youth justice and community safety practitioners to begin to question both the effectiveness and the justice of the Anti-Social Behaviour Order. Legal professionals too have been expressing concern about the impact of ASBOs on vulnerable clients (e.g. homeless alcoholics) who are having conditions being written into the orders (for example, not to be seen on the street drinking).

Many of these concerns and others came together at the public launch meeting of a broad-based coalition, 'ASBO Concern' at a packed meeting of over 200 at the Friends Meeting House in central London in early April. What was striking about the meeting was the broad range of contributions from the floor. Magistrates, housing workers, community safety workers and council employees expressed professional concern about the ASBO while others came forward with personal stories about the impact of the order. Examples given were: a man with Tourettes who had an ASBO against displaying the symptoms of his disability in the street; a woman who had spent the last year defending her disabled sister and partner from being evicted from a private housing association due to the complaints of neighbours based on simple prejudice; a support worker for prostitutes described how the women were being found guilty of ASBO

breach for walking on the wrong side of the road.

Housing workers at the meeting complained that they were being given ASBO targets to meet irrespective of the behaviour in their patch. Others made the point that many of the people who end up with ASBOs are complex people with complex problems and that an ASBO is an ineffective, blunt response to what may be their difficult behaviour.

ASBO Concern's aims are:

1. To bring together those concerned about the way ASBOs are used – charities, professionals, trade unions, community groups, young people and others – in a joint campaign.
2. To publicly highlight the problems with ASBOs, and the need for alternative ways of tackling anti-social behaviour that do not criminalise people for behaviour that is not criminal.
3. To counteract the scapegoating and stigmatising of children, young people and other vulnerable groups.
4. To campaign for properly funded youth services and support for those who need it.
5. To campaign for a full public government review of ASBOs and the way they are used.

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'pampering' although its availability can, argues **Victoria Knight**, become part of control mechanisms within prison.

Despite the volume of criticism levelled at the media, it remains a vital source of information and a number of contributions argue that more informative and positive coverage can be achieved. Even in extreme cases involving the death penalty, as **Chris Eades** reports, attempts can be made to limit adverse and unfair publicity, although in this case, a fair trial could only be ensured by removing it from the local area. While many contributions have focused on national television and press, other forms of media are also important. **Nic Groombridge** points to the more balanced coverage of radio and argues that it can be used to greater effect. **Lucie Russell** details how Smart Justice, a group seeking to reduce the use of imprisonment, used a wide range of popular, local and targeted media, which can also be used, argues **Allan Ross**, to present positive messages from the Home Office.

Such strategies should, he argues, be based on an understanding of how the media works, a point also made by **Enver Solomon**, who outlines a number of steps, including the provision of clear information, which can be taken by the criminal justice sector to ensure more helpful coverage while recognising the inevitability of oversimplification and political 'spin'.