

Seminar presentation

Strategic work and antisocial behaviour – community based solutions

Liz Nicholson, Shelter Scotland

**Anti social Behaviour Seminar
June 2004**

www.shelter.org.uk

© 2004 Shelter. All rights reserved. This document is only for your personal, non-commercial use.
You may not copy, reproduce, republish, post, distribute, transmit or modify it in any way.

This document contains information and policies that were correct at the time of publication.

Shelter

Strategic Work and Antisocial Behaviour – Community Based Solutions

Good afternoon. When Shelter began planning this seminar, we knew there was a risk that the bill wouldn't have completed its parliamentary passage by the end of June. In hindsight, we need not have worried. We should have known that a bill that the Scottish Executive was so intent on passing would be safely on the statute books by the summer. The speed at which the bill went through parliament is, I think, indicative of the kind of priority the Scottish Executive has given to antisocial behaviour, and to its own proposals for dealing with the problem.

Those proposals have indicated a seismic shift in the approach taken by the Scottish Executive to so-called 'social problems' like antisocial behaviour, since the last parliament. The language used to promote this bill was one that raised fear among communities of the extent of the problem, and convinced the media that tough new laws are the answer. The emphasis on social justice, so obvious in the passage of recent progressive homelessness legislation vanished without warning. The antisocial behaviour bill was a vehicle for handing down heavy sanctions for anyone carrying out bad behaviour. While its language was class neutral, and age neutral, the provisions in the bill held up young people and those in social housing as the main culprits.

Now that the bill is passed, and we can look back over what might have been, I'm more convinced than ever that we didn't need the new laws. I'm certain that many of the new powers won't be used, and that antisocial behaviour is as big a problem now, as it was when the Scottish Executive set out its plans for tackling it, in the Strategy published last year.

So, where do we go from here? We have new laws on the statute books that have been hailed by many as potentially ineffective; the Executive will claim it has achieved its priority of passing antisocial legislation through parliament. Should local communities accept that their time at the top of the political agenda has passed, gratefully go back to where they live and tolerate the continuing bad behaviour, happy in the knowledge that at least the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament meant well?

I hope not. The language used by the Executive convinced many that new laws were the answer, putting the focus on strict legal sanctions. What went unnoticed in the frenzied media portrayal of 'out of control' young people was the huge successes already being developed across Scotland. Innovative, successful support projects working with young people, antisocial families and individuals. Youth workers and neighbourhood wardens, developing relationships with communities, and bringing a fresh, can-do attitude to tackling the problem. These were all forgotten in the rush to give police, local authorities

and courts new powers, and the criminal justice system more young offenders. Despite this, I still strongly believe that it is these community responses that will provide communities with the lasting solutions they deserve.

We need to go back to the basics of 'what works', and in workshops this afternoon, that's what we'll be doing. Going beyond the negatives of legal sanctions and thinking positively about how we tackle the problem.

In our response to the Scottish Executive Strategy to Tackle Antisocial Behaviour, Shelter advocated a three-pronged response to the problem that reflected the range of behaviours across a range of housing tenures.

The first approach is to prevent conflict. Despite the media fixation with young peoples' behaviour, the single most common cause of complaints about antisocial behaviour is actually noise nuisance. Noise is the reason for nearly half of all neighbour nuisance complaints, and happens as much in the private sector as in social housing. A quarterly report from West Lothian's Neighbourhood Response Team shows the majority of complaints regarding noise nuisance are against owner-occupiers. The reason is that too many houses have paper-thin walls, and modern sound equipment puts more pressure on these poor conditions than ever before. Shelter's solution is for a major programme of sound insulation to dramatically reduce the level of anti-social behaviour. Despite this, when the Executive launched a Quality Standard for Scotland's housing stock last February, a standard for noise insulation was not included. The Scottish Executive's fascination with legal sanctions for antisocial behaviour has meant it has taken its eye off what really works.

Our second approach is to actively work with people to change behaviour. This approach is much more challenging, but our experience is that most people want to change: practitioners should be given the time, with people, to find the right kind of support. However, as many of you will experience on a daily basis, there are many obstacles to providing the right kind of support to everyone who needs it in Scotland. A shortage of support workers means too much time is spent on crisis work. There have been limitations to what Supporting People has funded, and I'm concerned that there's ambiguity around the kind of support that's being funded. I have publicly asked Margaret Curran to publish information on the number and nature of support projects being funded across Scotland. If we know what *is* being funded, we can track what support, and what service users are being left out. Unless we can provide support to the most challenging, we are nowhere near our aims of tackling a difficult but solvable problem.

The final approach is specialist effort. If the first two policies succeed, specialist effort can be concentrated on the much smaller number of people determined to cause mayhem. The powers that are needed already exist but they are not used effectively or efficiently.

More court time is needed to ensure that local authorities can take legal action when they need to. Ironically, every time the government changes the law, it distracts police and housing officers away from getting on with the job. There is a risk that the new legislation will add to these pressures for those public servants trying to deal with the problem. For example, an increase in evictions due to measures in the bill will place increased pressure on housing officers to re-house families.

Communities must have a range of solutions available to tackle antisocial behaviour, and to get this process back on track, the Scottish Executive must resurrect its Strategy to Tackle Antisocial Behaviour. It must dust off its proposals for non-legal community approaches, and kick start an approach that rewards success in communities rather than always punishing bad behaviour. It should be underpinned by prevention, and include all elements of community management; housing managers, youth workers, tenants, the police, schools, and so on.

Early identification of problems is crucial, and this can only take place if a good relationship exists between the community and the local council and police. Community based approaches, which include community wardens, tenant reward schemes and community mediation schemes must be given the resources to allow them to be rolled out across the country. Staff from Aberdeen City Council are here today to facilitate a workshop on how tenant reward schemes are making a difference to antisocial behaviour levels in Aberdeen, and Ian McDonagh is here from SACRO to host a workshop on mediation.

Approaches should recognise the need to empower young people to make the decision to change their behaviour. An example of such an approach is the development of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts. First developed in Islington in England, these contracts give young people the chance to be involved in how their behaviour is managed. Rather than hit them with a Dispersal Order, or an ASBO, the contracts are a tool for communicating with young people, understanding the root cause of the behaviour, and preventing further antisocial behaviour from taking place. Edinburgh City Council is currently developing the contracts and Jane Ritchie has kindly agreed to facilitate a workshop on the nuts and bolts of developing the scheme.

Acceptable Behaviour Contracts will help to tackle misplaced assumptions about the nature and causes of antisocial behaviour. Attempts to deal with antisocial behaviour must have this at its core. It took us many years to convince our politicians that the concept of the “deserving and undeserving poor” should be removed from the homelessness legislation. A similar change in mindset is required to convince people that the occurrence of antisocial behaviour depends on the person rather than the kind of housing tenure in which they live. If politicians, both local and national, accept that, then they must accept that policies to tackle antisocial behaviour should work across tenures

too. A person who lives in council housing, and who is served with an antisocial behaviour order, is more likely to lose their tenancy than someone who is an owner occupier because the ASBO is linked to social tenancies under the law. The law and public policy continue to be harshest on those who live in social housing.

And while the sanctions are weighted on those in social housing, support based- solutions are not always forthcoming. I'm disappointed at the level of attention given to support by the Scottish Executive in its Strategy, and by MSPs when the bill was going through parliament. In our written and oral evidence to the Communities Committee, we asked for ASBOs to be linked to support, instead of tenancies, so that, particularly under-16s would be *guaranteed* support alongside their ASBO, increasing the chance of effectively resolving the behaviour from the outset. By failing to provide support alongside ASBOs for Under 16s, the Scottish Executive has already set young people up to fail.

I'm also concerned about recent attempts by the government in Westminster to put support projects on a mandatory footing. Two weeks ago, David Blunkett announced plans to tackle antisocial behaviour that will make participation in support compulsory. This is typical of governments who see every response in terms of sanctions. Making support a sanction will seriously jeopardise the potential success of support. It will endanger the approach that Shelter and other organisations are taking. Helping families understand their behaviour and resolve it. Support must continue to be voluntary or it simply won't work. If the focus on legal sanctions has taught us anything, it's that you can't force people to change behaviour; they must do it because they want to.

More thought must be given to the implications of applying legal sanctions, and what this means for the community. What of those young people who don't get the support they need and fail ASBOs? Is the Executive ready for a significant increase in the number of children entering the criminal justice system? What of those families who are evicted because of antisocial behaviour? Where do they go, and what of the next community they enter, who will support them?

The irony is that while governments in both Scotland and England are focused on punitive solutions, the voluntary sector, often in partnership with local authorities and the police, are solving the problem within communities. Shelter's Families Projects based in Edinburgh, Glasgow and South Lanarkshire work with homeless families to sustain tenancies. Like the Dundee Families Project that you will hear about later this afternoon, this can often mean working with families to change their anti-social behaviour. Support workers spend time with families to find the root causes of their behaviour. They will look together at what needs to change to prevent them going down the same route again. They also look at what support there may be to deal with their issues, and help families build confidence, to believe that things can change.

Our Inclusion Project in England directly involves families in agreeing support plans. Service users are those who have had difficulty keeping tenancies because of antisocial behaviour. Support plans are produced based on a multi-agency approach to solving problems. Families then sign up to their plans and agree to work with the service to achieve the identified outcomes. Interim evaluation of the project shows that this approach works. 29 out of 33 households supported for over six months were still in their original tenancies. Families respond to being involved in their own development, and levels of antisocial behaviour have dramatically reduced in these households. Parents welcome the parenting advice and emotional support provided by support workers. Children respond to having their own worker; someone who will listen to them, instead of speaking at them.

For our project workers the answers to anti-social behaviour are clear: give people the best opportunity to be a decent neighbour and to keep their home. Work to prevent anti-social behaviour occurring in the first place and take innovative and lasting approaches when it does. Sometimes the most practical solutions are the best.

Yet, time and time again, the Scottish Executive has missed opportunities to make support a central plank of tackling antisocial behaviour and wider problems within communities. In the autumn, Jack McConnell will publish his spending plans for the next three years in a Comprehensive Spending Review. If he really wants to tackle deep seated problems in Scotland's communities, then his priority should be to fund what has been proven to work; and roll out successful support projects across Scotland. Projects that train young people to organise events in their own community, to inspire their peers to get involved in community based solutions. Projects that bring community residents closer to the decision making process in their area. Projects that educate young people in schools about the need to be good neighbours. These are all happening on a small scale in Scotland, because of innovative thinkers within communities who think the antisocial behaviour problem is one with a solution. And they are producing incredible results.

However, the success of innovative community based initiatives are still dependent on the community in which they operate, and it is this issue which I think the Scottish Executive has wholeheartedly failed to address. So many of Scotland's communities are in a chronic state, both in terms of physical condition, access to public amenities and high concentrations of problems like bad housing, homelessness, poor health, unemployment and poverty.

A combination of selling off council stock, demolitions, empty homes and poor allocations practices have left some areas 'ghettoised' and beset by problems. Scotland has the worst housing in Western Europe, and yet spending on housing is at a historic low.

Unless we deal with the fundamental problems faced by these areas, we will only continue to touch on some of the problems without really getting to their root cause and preventing antisocial behaviour in the long term. That means accepting the limits of the current stock of social housing; and building new and affordable social rented housing and creating mixed tenure communities so that social housing tenants can leave behind the stigma attached to living in housing 'schemes'.

Prevention, support and specialist effort is the key to tackling antisocial behaviour. This approach is echoed by many of the organisations that responded to both the strategy and the bill, and by the many support projects that exist to get to the root of antisocial behaviour. Passing the legislation was the easy bit. Implementing non-legal solutions, community based solutions is where the challenges, but ultimately the successes lie.