

Have you got what it takes?

Antisocial behaviour

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Important facts

Antisocial behaviour (ASB) is a broad term used to describe day-to-day incidents of crime, nuisance and disorder that blight many neighbourhoods – from littering, graffiti and vandalism, to drunken, rowdy behavior in public, to noisy, abusive or intimidating neighbours.

The most recent statistics (published by the Office for National Statistics in *Crime in England and Wales: Quarterly First Release to March 2012*, 19 July 2012) show that, in the year to the end of March 2012, police forces in England and Wales recorded 2.7 million incidents of ASB. We also know that many more incidents are reported to other agencies, such as councils and social landlords, or are not reported at all.

The Government's Crime Survey in England and Wales also reported that 15% of people perceived there to be a high level of ASB in their local area in 2011/12, and that 30% had personally experienced or witnessed ASB in that time.

Polling suggests that reducing ASB is consistently a high priority for the public when it comes to crime and policing issues in their area. Left unchecked, ASB can be linked to wider crime and disorder in an area – the so-called 'broken windows' theory. It can also, particularly where it is persistent or targeted, have a serious impact on victims' lives.

The wide range of problems described as 'antisocial' means that responsibility for dealing with ASB is shared between a number of agencies, particularly the police, councils and social landlords. Agencies will often look to deal with ASB informally in the first instance, with measures such as warning letters or Acceptable Behaviour Contracts. There are, however, numerous formal powers – many available in the civil rather than the criminal courts – to deal with more serious or persistent problems.

Civil powers to deal with ASB can give the police and their partners an alternative to criminal prosecution in cases where it is difficult to prove that an offence has been committed (e.g. where victims or witnesses are afraid to give evidence against their neighbours). They can also be used to prevent future ASB, which can help to stop the kind of sustained harassment of vulnerable victims seen in some high-profile cases.

The Government has announced plans to streamline the formal powers, replacing nineteen of them with six faster, flexible, and more effective ones. Agencies are, however, encouraged to use the existing measures where they offer the best available means of protecting victims and communities until the new powers come into effect.

What works in tackling ASB

- **What is seen as 'antisocial' will vary from victim to victim, and from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. The right response in each case will depend on a range of factors, including the needs of the victim and the impact the ASB is having on their lives. As a result, solutions need to be developed jointly by the police and other local agencies, each with their own understanding of the situation and context, and working with victims and communities.**
- **In many (but not all) cases, informal measures for dealing with ASB will stop the perpetrator's behaviour and deliver swift respite for the victim. Frontline professionals must be free to use their judgment and discretion to decide what kind of approach best meets the needs of the victim and the community.**
- **The last few years have seen an increasing recognition of the harm ASB can cause, particularly to repeat and vulnerable victims. The police have, for example, have reduced the number of categories for recording ASB incidents to three ('environmental', 'nuisance' and 'personal'), making it easier to identify cases where victims are at risk. A number of forces are also working with other agencies to improve their management of ASB cases,**

including assessing the risk to victims at the first point of contact, and better logging of repeat calls. A Home Office report on trials conducted by eight forces is available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/crime/asb-focus-on-the-victim>.

- **In some areas, the police and their local partners are using the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) approach to deal with high-risk ASB cases. Initially developed to deal with domestic violence, MARACs bring agencies (for example, the police, the community safety team, the youth offending team, social landlords, childrens' services, mental health services) together to decide on the range of actions and support needed to help protect vulnerable victims and stop the ASB in question.**

The Home Office's annual Tilley Awards showcase innovative local projects to prevent or reduce crime, and many – including last year's winner – focus on antisocial behavior. More details are available at; <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime/partnerships/tilley-awards/tilley-awards-2012>

The Government's ASB reforms

In May, the Government published *Putting victims first: more effective responses to antisocial behaviour* (available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime/anti-social-behaviour/white-paper>). It outlines the need for the response to ASB to focus more on victims and, as part of that, on the key role of Police and Crime Commissioners in driving that response locally.

Putting victims first also set out plans to introduce faster, more effective formal powers to ensure professionals have the means to deal with persistent or serious ASB. Nineteen of the current powers will be replaced with six new ones, including:

- **a civil injunction that agencies can use immediately to protect victims and communities before an individual causes serious harm;**
- **a new court order for the most antisocial individuals, available on conviction, that allows the courts to require them to stop their behaviour and address its underlying causes;**
- **simpler powers to deal with 'quality of life' crime and ASB, and to close premises that are a magnet for trouble; and**
- **a more effective police power to stop ASB in public places.**

The Home Secretary has also announced that the Government will introduce the 'Community Trigger' – giving victims and communities a new right to require that local agencies take action to deal with persistent ASB where previous reports have been ignored. The Home Office is working with a number of local areas this year to trial the trigger before legislation is introduced.