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

Poster Presentation

Amy Carter

[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


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

What does anti-social behaviour mean?

As defined by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, anti-social behaviour is committed by persons who have 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 themselves.

What do agencies do?

The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit aims to find a solution to tackle anti-social behaviour, by engaging with individuals to modify their behaviour within a multi-agency problem solving context.

How is this achieved?

• Agencies are beginning to receive specific training on anti-social behaviour, and engage with individuals to modify their behaviour, 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 diagram below shows the escalation process which agencies need to follow when dealing with anti-social behaviour. This shows high priority cases, under which action is taken after three warning letters have been issued and the perpetrator has not improved, and low priority cases. High priority cases may result in enforcement action, which is likely to be more lenient than low priority cases. The diagram also demonstrates the relationship between agencies, and how the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit becomes involved. This only occurs after three warning letters have been issued and the perpetrator has not improved.

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

What can we conclude?

• Multi-dimensional problems need multi-agency solutions!
• Although multi-agency approaches for dealing with anti-social behaviour may be flexible, they are not without challenges. The effectiveness of these approaches is reliant on agencies working across all organisations, and effective relationships between agencies may take time to develop. Baines, 1998.
• Therefore, despite the issues some agencies may face by using multi-agency approaches, it is recommended that effective methods of dealing with multi-faceted issues like anti-social behaviour (Baines et al., 1998).