

Working with communities to tackle low level disorder and anti-social behaviour

Nicola Bacon and Saffron James on empowering neighbourhoods.

The arguments for involving people at the very local neighbourhood level in tackling anti-social behaviour and low level crime are well known. Involvement can be empowering, making people feel their voice has been heard; it signals service responsiveness to major concerns about quality of life and delivers results by taking advantage of local intelligence and networks. Above all, any policing needs to be given legitimacy by communities if it is to be effective in stopping crime and disorder. Anti-social behaviour is concentrated in deprived areas (Wood, 2004), so action to tackle it is key to an overall approach to neighbourhood renewal. However, within this there are important questions: how community opinion should inform responses to different types of anti-social behaviour and low level crime, how services should involve neighbourhoods and communities in their work, and how support for perpetrators to change behaviour should be balanced with enforcement action to stop immediate problems.

In the last decade anti-social behaviour has become an increasing policy and practice preoccupation. More recently Home Office action has increased in intensity, culminating with establishment of the 'Together' campaign, launched in 2003, out of which has now emerged the 'Respect' agenda.

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The Government's *Respect Action Plan* published earlier this year has the stated aim of giving individuals and communities more opportunities to tackle local disorder and anti-social behaviour. These include a 'community call for action', a new mechanism initially promised in the police reform White paper that will allow communities to compel local authorities and the police to investigate and potentially act on persistent community safety or anti-social behaviour issues, and proposals to make Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships more accountable to communities. The *Respect Action Plan* follows the approach of the earlier *Together Action Plan* by advocating a twin track approach to anti-social behaviour bringing together enforcement and support – albeit with a stronger public profile given to the 'enforcement' element of the package.

It is difficult to establish whether or not anti-social behaviour has in fact increased in recent years. However, underlying changes in social relationships in recent decades have had an impact. When social cohesion breaks down, one of the losses

is communities' capacity to self-police on anti-social behaviour. In the past residents may have been more confident about confronting inconsiderate behaviour on their doorsteps. Public perceptions of the problems have risen, peaking in 2002/03 when 21 per cent of the population believed anti-social behaviour to be a significant problem in the area where they lived. Since then this figure has declined, down to 16 per cent in 2003/04 although rising again marginally to 17 per cent in 2004-05 (Home Office 2006).

The relationship between perception and experience of anti-social behaviour is difficult to untangle. Home Office research suggests that a high proportion of those perceiving problems in their area had experienced problems. However like any perception indicator, a number of other factors come into play, including fear of other sorts of crime, alarm about terrorism and events at the very local level including serious crimes.

Understanding what goes on at the local level is therefore vital. The Young Foundation is working with 13 local authorities taking forward a major programme of work on neighbourhood empowerment. Last year, in partnership with the original eight members of our Transforming Neighbourhoods Consortium, over 160 community representatives, councillors and practitioners were contacted to discuss their most pressing

problems in developing community and neighbourhood empowerment. Working in areas as diverse as Surrey and Tottenham, Malmesbury in Wiltshire and Balsall Heath in Birmingham, clear consensus about priorities for action at the very local level emerged.

In all eight areas community and neighbourhood activists expressed a consistent wish to see results and real action in response to their concerns. The issues they wanted to do most about were the local environment, street scene, crime and youth provision. Community representatives often singled out young people as a cause of local problems, however the solutions they advocated tended to focus on the shortage of things to do for local youth rather than the need for enforcement action. Activists did not articulate much concern for those young people seen to be out of control and subject to ASBOs, but neither did they advocate that tough action should be the primary response to young people's problem behaviour.

Community representatives' apparent awareness of the

need to tackle the cause of anti-social behaviour as well as its immediate manifestations chimes with the dual focus of Government policy on enforcement and support. If this is to be implemented, it demands that enforcement agencies and those that provide support work together effectively on the ground to respond to local concerns.

Data is scarce about the effectiveness of different approaches, however one service has won praise. The police response to concerns about anti-social behaviour and low level crime and disorder is neighbourhood policing and an extension of the numbers and types of non-police personnel employed to take action at street level. Buttressed by increased powers to levy fixed penalty notices the 'extended police family' has been positively received. A national evaluation of Community Support Officers (CSOs) showed that CSOs make a positive contribution to anti-social behaviour (Cooper *et al*, 2006). The Young Foundation's recent local work found that in the majority of areas that had experienced it, this new model of neighbourhood policing has been well received by the majority of agencies and community activists.

It is relatively easy for the police, with their 'command and control' structure, to redeploy their forces at neighbourhood level, easier probably than for the council services responsible for community safety, environmental services and youth services. Neighbourhood policing demonstrates that services that organise strategically over large geographical areas can deliver and respond to concerns at the most local level. More intensively than other services, police forces have been asked to respond simultaneously to the pulls of localisation and regionalisation. Decades of centralisation by successive governments have seen the creation of ever larger police forces and a reduction in the power of local police authorities to influence their work (Loveday 2006).

However in spite of this there is strong evidence from neighbourhood management pathfinders that the police have been more active partners in neighbourhood management initiatives than agencies that deliver the support side of the anti-social behaviour equation, including social services and Youth Offending Teams (YOTs).

The Young Foundation's work on neighbourhood and community empowerment is beginning to unpick how different services can be influenced or delivered at the local level and has established that different approaches are needed for different functions. For all services, strategic control – including risk management and meeting statutory duties – needs to remain at the centre. However, there is a big difference between the ability of a street sweeping function and, say, adult social care, to respond to neighbourhood concerns. For street sweepers, adapting to local conditions makes sense and carries few risks. Social care services need to respond to individual needs, are driven largely by statute, and aim to resolve issues that are often sensitive and confidential. This limits their scope to respond to community concerns.

These distinctions are inevitably reflected in services' response to different forms of anti-social behaviour. A crude distinction can be made between issues involving damage or threat to public space such as environmental damage, abandoned cars or graffiti and anti-social behaviour perpetrated by vulnerable families and individuals. Agencies that tackle 'public space' issues have significant potential to devolve influence to the local level and even delegate the running of some services to neighbourhood bodies. However when it comes

to dealing with the chaotic circumstances of many families and individuals involved in anti-social behaviour, community involvement can be counter productive. There are risks that confidential information could be disclosed or that vulnerable people's best interests are not respected. At worst it can lead to scapegoating and reprisals.

Support to help troubled and troublesome people tackle underlying issues needs to lead problem-solving for individuals and families involved in anti-social behaviour. But where does this leave communities?

Many opponents of Government anti-social behaviour policy have failed to take account of the enormous impact that the behaviour of a few damaged individuals can have on entire neighbourhoods. Agencies, both enforcement and support led, need to take a strong role in protecting neighbourhoods, providing short term alleviation through enforcement and the longer term cure offered by support. Agencies who traditionally have led on enforcement action – the police, environmental services, street scene agencies and housing providers – need to improve their working relationships with support providers, crucially social services, YOTs and educational welfare services. They need to be more attuned to the need for long term solutions and reduce reliance on enforcement alone and headline seeking 'get tough' approaches. Support led services conversely need to make sure that their work is driven by community needs for protection from disorder, balancing this with the need to provide services to vulnerable individuals.

The Young Foundation's research and practical experience of working with 13 local authorities has supported our belief that neighbourhoods should, where they choose, be given new powers to influence services. This should help deliver results in tackling anti-social behaviour and low level crime and disorder but cannot be the sole solution to these problems. The response to disorder and anti social behaviour at neighbourhood level has a clear neighbourhood dimension, however success will rely on the sensitive interplay of community engagement, enforcement and support provision. New powers for communities need to be reinforced by services working well together at the neighbourhood level, action planning strategically, locally and on individual cases.

Nicola Bacon is Local Projects Director and **Saffron James** is a Research Associate and Transforming Neighbourhoods Project Manager at the Young Foundation, www.youngfoundation.org.uk The Transforming Neighbourhoods programme is a research and innovation project on neighbourhood empowerment in England.

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