


Behaving badly

Troublesome teenagers donning hooded tops have been banned from covering their faces and those who rampage in an alcohol-fuelled rage could find themselves banned from their local pubs under the Asbo system. John Dean finds out whether Asbos (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders) and their ilk are a useful tool for police officers.

 Police officers from Cleveland Police in Stockton, on Teesside, are using the Asbo system to help spearhead a new approach to offenders committing violent crimes. Working with Stockton Borough Council, the police have adopted a 'three-strikes and you are out' approach, which uses Asbos to curb the behaviour of those responsible for violence.

The initiative arose out of Stockton's favourable experience of Asbos and acceptable behaviour contracts in cases coming under the wider 'anti-social behaviour' description.

In such cases, a good example would be teenagers misbehaving outside a shopping parade, their parents are sent a letter bringing their child's actions to their attention.

The letters, also sent to adult offenders, warn that the offender's behaviour will not be tolerated and they are invited to enter into an acceptable behaviour contract, which dictates a standard of behaviour. If breached, the contract can be used in an Asbo hearing.

To date, 11 Asbos have been issued in the Stockton area and two people have been jailed for breaching orders.

But Stockton-based community safety Insp Mark Thornton is at pains to point out that, although a useful tool, they must not be seen as a replacement for prosecution where offences have been committed.

He said: 'The process for anti-social behaviour is straight-

forward in terms of giving people the opportunity to recognise that their behaviour is not acceptable. However, the message to our officers is that the term anti-social behaviour should not hide criminality. If an officer is called to an offence, there is an offender and they will be charged with a criminal offence.

Contracts

'What we are doing with the acceptable behaviour contracts is giving people an opportunity to address their behaviour. If it is a child, their parents might be at their wits end and this may help.

'It is also important to remember that Asbos do not just relate to children, they relate to adults as well. It is across the board. The use of acceptable behaviour contracts ram home the message of what people should and should not do.'

In addition, breaches of the contracts can be a powerful weapon should an Asbo be applied for, showing that every effort was made to help the perpetrator.

Insp Thornton said: 'We believe that it works: we have had people who have signed the contract and have not come to our attention again.'

The success of the Asbo system encouraged police to develop it further by applying it to violent, often drunken, adult offenders, but this time without offering the acceptable behaviour contract.

It is a much tougher system. Someone arrested twice for violent behaviour is warned that a third arrest within a six month period - regardless of conviction - would result in an application for an Asbo.

Insp Thornton said: 'This does not replace the court process, this runs alongside it and it allows us to introduce restrictions on a person's behav-



Graffiti: Cleveland police have found the Asbo system useful

our, such as banning them from a certain area, even before the court case has been resolved.

'We have done this because we recognised that violent behaviour was having an effect on the town centre in terms of offences linked to drink and committed by people fuelled by alcohol. It was having an effect on the night-time economy.'

Extra officers

Cracking down on drunken violence is already a high priority for the force and Stockton police has entered in to an agreement whereby local licencees fund additional officers on the streets at key times.

Since the Asbo system was expanded to cover violence, 20 letters have been sent out warning offenders about the three strikes rule.

Already, one woman has been subject to an interim Asbo. She had been persistently involved in fights, fuelled by drink, and the Asbo was introduced to restrict her movement, keeping her away from areas where the offences happened. It was introduced before her court case and will be reviewed when the court makes a decision on her case.

For Insp Thornton, the link with Stockton Council is important, so much so that two police officers work within the authority's anti-social behaviour team.

He believes the link is useful because the council has access to a wide range of additional information and its support is also influential in an Asbo application.

Insp Thornton also values the council's access to services which might help someone who is subject to an Asbo to address their problems.

He cites the recent case of a man constantly getting into trouble because of circumstances at home and issues in the area where he lived. The council was able to put support in place to help him curb his disruptive behaviour.

Insp Thornton said: 'There is no mystique about Asbos, it is not rocket science. It allows us to deal with anti-social behaviour and there is a benefit to the indi-



Insp Mark Thornton: Asbo system helps deter bad behaviour

vidual because you can help them address their problems.

'Serving an Asbo is the last port of call when a variety of routes to quash the unacceptable behaviour have been exhausted. Partnership is essential. Every-thing we do is in partnership with the anti-social behaviour team of Stockton council.

'It is early days in Stockton, and we only recently started using Asbos for violent offences, but if we can prevent criminal behaviour, which would have left just one victim with injuries, then it has been a success.'

Stockton council agrees. Chris Dunwell, anti-social behaviour officer for the Authority, said: 'We are sending a clear message that activities that cause harassment alarm and distress will not be tolerated in Stockton.'

And Carolyn Crean, the Council's crime and disorder manager, said: 'We are determined to eradicate anti-social behaviour and the misery it brings. We will continue to work with our partners and other agencies to ensure that residents, employees and businesses are protected from acts of anti-social behaviour within the Stockton borough.'

Case study

It is a similar story in neighbouring Middlesbrough. Earlier this year, 13-year-old Dale Carter became one of the youngest Asbo recipients in the country. He had been terrorising residents on the Pallister Park estate, for two years. Carter, of Linmoor Avenue, was given the two-year order after Middlesbrough council pre-

sented Teesside Magistrates' Court with more than 120 incidents. They included setting fire to properties, attacking street wardens, racing wheelchairs and rampaging around sheltered accommodation.

The 16-point order said he must not cause harassment, alarm or distress, or incite others. He was banned from throwing stones and other missiles, congregating in a group of more than three, drinking alcohol, using illegal drugs and using threatening or insulting words and behaviour. The youngster was also banned from a number of streets in the area.

There have been other Asbos imposed in the borough and Cllr Barry Coppinger, the council's executive member for community safety, said: 'People who don't settle down when they receive an anti-social behaviour order end up losing their freedom and we watch these situations very carefully.'

'It does show that when residents, street wardens and finally the courts work together, we can get a result and make a difference.'

Dispersal notices

Police are also using another piece of legislation - dispersal notices - to tackle drunken violence in Middlesbrough town centre.

The order gives police powers to impose bans on people engaged in alcohol-fuelled violence, ensuring that they keep away from the area for 24 hours.

Now, Middlesbrough police has increased patrols during the summer to reinforce the initiative.

Insp (acting) Paul Higgins said: 'No one wants people to stop having a good time. Warm summer nights encourage people to go out and enjoy themselves. However, we will not tolerate the antics of a drunken minority causing mayhem in Middlesbrough town centre, disrupting businesses and being a threat to the majority of customers in clubs and pubs who simply want a pleasant night out.'

Fact Box:

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (Asbos) are statutory measures that aim to protect the public from behaviour that causes or is likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress.

An order contains conditions prohibiting the offender from specific anti-social acts or entering defined areas, and is effective for a minimum of two years. Restrictions could include banning them from specific places of associating with certain people.

Asbos are civil orders made in court. They can be applied for by local authorities, police forces (including the British Transport Police) and by registered social landlords, but not by members of the public.

The civil status of Asbos means hearsay and professional witness evidence can be heard in applications. Breach of an order is a criminal offence, which is arrestable and recordable.

An Acceptable Behaviour Contract (ABC) is a voluntary written agreement between a person who has been involved in anti-social behaviour and one or more local agencies whose role it is to prevent such behaviour, including police and housing authorities.

ABCs are most commonly used for young people but may also be used for adults.

The contract specifies a list of anti-social acts in which the person has been involved and which they agree not to continue.

Source: Home Office