



Final findings: Anti-social behaviour and family interventions

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This briefing summarises the key findings of longitudinal research with 23 individuals in cities in England and Scotland subject to welfare conditionality related to anti-social behaviour (ASB).

Key findings

- The majority of research participants evidenced behaviour change and experienced changes to their circumstances during the period of the study.
- Given the multiple forms of vulnerability of the research participants, the process of behaviour change is complex and non-linear, varying considerably between individuals and over time, with periods of progress and regression.
- Interventions, particularly supportive mechanisms, were essential elements of these changes, although they were only one form of influence acting upon individuals and households. Many very significant outcomes, such as crisis management, improved routines and parenting and enhanced self-confidence and health, are often more difficult to capture than more measurable 'hard' transformative outcomes.
- The supportive role of Family Intervention Projects was identified as a key factor in the behaviour change achieved by many research participants, with this support comprising direct intervention, signposting to other services and an advocacy role.
- In contrast, sanctions were viewed more negatively and ambiguously, especially where legal or financial sanctions were applied without an accompanying package of support. However, some respondents argued that sanctions could be important in triggering a motivation to change and encouraging engagement with, and adherence to, supportive intervention packages.
- Research participants recognised the impact of their problematic behaviour and the need for agencies to address this and, therefore, supported in principle the ethical basis of sanctions. However, they often challenged the application and utility of sanctions in their own cases.
- The ethical support for the necessity of some sanctions linked to ASB was contrasted with sanctions related to employment-based benefits, which were regarded as being unfair and ineffective. Similarly, the personalised, sustained and holistic support provided by Family Intervention Projects was contrasted with the impersonal, often automated, use of benefit sanctions.
- The growing use of benefit sanctions is fundamentally changing the nature of interaction between individuals and the services aimed at supporting them and raises new challenges in achieving behaviour change for the most marginalised groups in society.
- Poor communication meant some respondents did not understand the reasons for sanction, or the engagement with mandatory support and behavioural requirements placed on them.
- Many WSUs are broadly supportive of welfare rights being linked to specified responsibilities. They are, however, more critical of how welfare conditionality is being implemented.

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Introduction

Addressing anti-social behaviour (ASB) has been a key priority for successive UK and Scottish Governments since 1997, resulting in a range of new legislation, power and mechanisms, including making access to housing, education and benefits conditional on appropriate conduct. ASB-related interventions, including Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) comprise a complex combination of support and sanction elements. This briefing identifies the extent and forms of behaviour change outcomes linked to particular interventions, assesses the efficacy and effectiveness of support and sanctions and reflects on the ethical implications of the increasing use of conditionality, including benefit sanctions, in ASB and FIP interventions.

Context

Addressing ASB has been a key priority for successive UK and Scottish governments since 1997, including the increasing use of intensive FIPs. In England, the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act (2014) consolidated and extended existing legal powers. The Troubled Families Programme aimed to ‘turn around the lives’ of 120,000 families by 2020, although the programme was recently subject to a very critical [national evaluation](#).

In Scotland, the 2009 Framework, developed by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), ‘Promoting Positive Outcomes’ – with an emphasis on early and preventative intervention – continues to underpin policy and practice addressing ASB. In both England and Scotland, approaches to tackling ASB have been increasingly devolved to local authorities and their partner organisations, with a reduction in the level of central government monitoring and evaluation of outcomes (see our [context paper](#)).

Individuals and households subject to conditionality-based interventions related to ASB experience multiple forms of vulnerability. A significant proportion of these individuals are now also subject to [new forms of conditionality](#) through assessment and sanctions relating to receipt of employment and disability benefits: This intersection of ASB and benefits conditionality is an [important context](#) for contemporary forms of support and sanction.

Findings

Interventions and outcomes

The majority of research participants experienced changes in their behaviour and circumstances during the period of the study (2014-2017). In many instances, the presenting issues (anti-social behaviour, parenting concerns, children's truancy from school or breach of tenancy conditions) had been resolved or significantly reduced. However, it is important to note two caveats to this positive finding: firstly, interventions and changes to conduct are often characterised by periods of progress followed by incidences of regression and further crisis, rather than consistent linear progression. Secondly, although positive behaviour change was achieved, with reductions in ASB and reduced risk of criminal sanctions, eviction or education-related enforcement measures, there was less evidence that the complex causes of behaviour and vulnerability had been addressed or that family circumstances and capacities had been enhanced sufficiently that positive behaviour change would be sustained post-intervention. There was also far less progress on outcomes such as securing access to employment.

The forms of conditionality interventions that individuals were subject to, and how these were implemented, varied considerably, although there was no clear geographical or demographic pattern to this differentiation. The forms of intervention may be classified into three main categories, with a clear pattern of outcomes associated with each:

- Intensive support, primarily through FIPs, but also through tenancy management processes.
- Legal mechanisms such as ASBOs, notice of possession and injunctions (as well as quasi-legal mechanisms such as Acceptable Behaviour Contracts [ABCs]).
- Employment and disability-related benefit sanctions.

The majority of research participants receiving intensive forms of support reported positive

changes. These included quantifiable transformative outcomes, including a cessation in ASB or interactions with the police or criminal justice system; the improved attendance, behaviour and academic progress of their children at school; or the removal of risks of eviction from a housing tenancy. But less quantifiable behaviour changes such as improved confidence and self-esteem, improved self-management, routines and motivation as well as enhanced mental and physical health were also very significant and often acted as prerequisite building blocks for achieving more measurable and sustained behaviour change and positive circumstances:

“ Just my home life, my family life, my social life; it’s just a lot of things all ground in one. I just feel a lot more comfortable in myself than I used to. I used to feel anxious about what that day would bring, but now I can get up and just say bring it on, yes.”

(FEMALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO ASBO, WAVE B)

Many research participants attributed this progress directly to these supportive interventions:

“ We’ve achieved so much and I don’t think I would have got through it without them [project workers] coming and helping, I don’t know where I would have been if I didn’t get the help that I did get. Things could have come out a lot worse.”

(FEMALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO FIP, WAVE C)

Research participants specifically identified elements where FIPs had contributed to behaviour change, including enabling them to implement coping strategies, build on their existing parenting skills in order to build better relationships with their children and to seek support for mental and physical health problems, including earlier life experiences of trauma and bereavement. This support was characterised by intensive interaction and engagement, often on a daily basis, and holistically addressing a range of issues and pressures faced by service users:

“ She opened my eyes to a wider path. Basically the work she did was absolutely amazing... She never ignored me. She was there all the time. I mean I can’t fault her because she helped me with a lot of stuff. Like getting my name on the exchange list and things like that. We had time away from the house and things like that, we used to go for coffees and that was good. I enjoyed that a lot. ”

(FEMALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO FIP, WAVE B)

For those with complex lifestyles such as homelessness, substance misuse and those involved in street cultures, behaviour change was challenging and often, periods of progress were followed by a regression into past routines and habits. It was also the case that, while support and sanctions were very significant factors in achieving behaviour change, they were not always the primary cause:

“ I just got older, I started to grow up a bit and get a bit wiser. I just had enough of going back in and out of jail. I’ve just had enough of going in and starting over and going back, starting all over. ”

(MALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO ASBO, WAVE A)

The efficacy of interventions

When reflecting on the balance between support and sanctions, and their complex relationship, most research participants argued that legal or financial sanctions, applied in isolation, were unlikely to deliver positive behaviour change:

“ By giving me that ASBO it wasn’t solving the problem; it was just moving me on somewhere else. The problem being moving on to somewhere else, there was no support around that ASBO or anything to try and help me resolve the problem of being homeless. ”

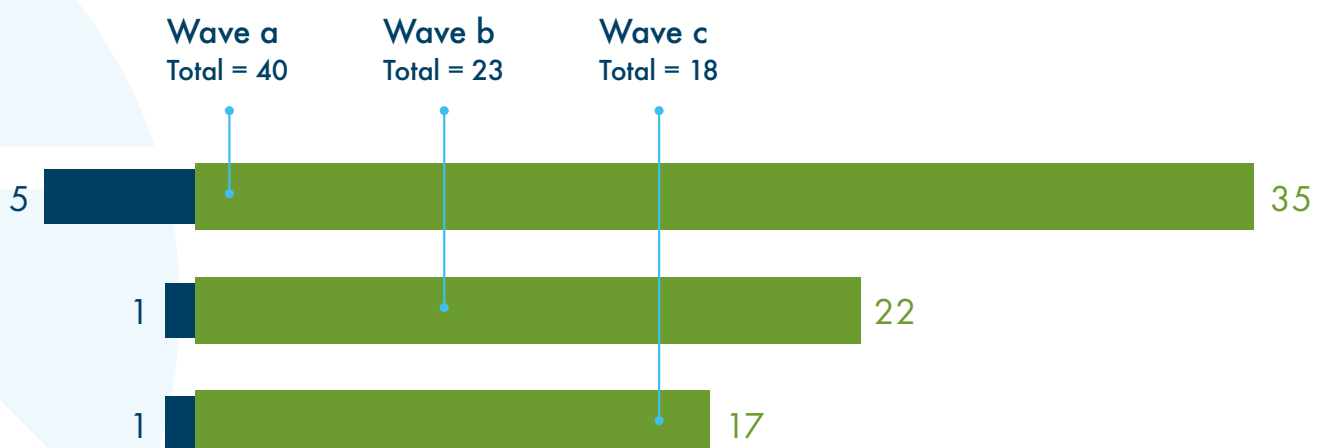
(FEMALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO ASBO, WAVE A).

Most individuals subject to formal sanctions argued that these were only effective with support and the efficacy of sanctions was also constrained by a limited understanding of their conditions:

“ It’s just a bit of paper and it has a map of the boundaries of where you’re not allowed to cross... ”

(FEMALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO ASBO, WAVE A)

EMPLOYMENT STATUS: In employment/Not in employment



However, research participants recognised that a combination of sanctions and support could be effective. The threat of potential and escalating sanctions, particularly the threat of the removal of children into care or losing accommodation, could trigger a reflection about individuals' conduct and its impact on others:

“ I think it was [helpful] in a way, yes. I think it was because it made me realise the way I was doing things wasn't right because you've got to have a bit more respect for your neighbours.”

(MALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO ASBO, WAVE B)

The threat of sanction could also be an influential mechanism in facilitating research participants to engage with intensive support services. So, for some individuals, these two elements both had parts to play in securing positive behaviour change and enhanced individual and household circumstances:

“ Well, I'd probably say I think they should both be together because, like I said, at first, I was disagreeing with the ASBO but then once I got the support and once I'd actually realised what was wrong and what had been said, I was like, 'Yes, I do definitely think that it should come together'. They should offer support as well as – because I know it was the housing that put me onto High Support, so I was lucky and got both parts.”

(FEMALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO ASBO, WAVE A)

This evidence indicates that sanctions in isolation are insufficient to achieve a reduction in problematic behaviour, while combining sanctions with support (and as a mechanism to facilitate engagement with that support) could be more effective. However, several research participants also stated that it was

the intensive support, primarily delivered by FIPs or tenancy support officers, that was the primary factor in behaviour change and that it was possible for this support to be provided, and to be effective, without recourse to sanctions. But behaviour change, particularly for such a marginalised and vulnerable group, remains complex and fragile. In particular, adhering to new forms of conditionality was often difficult and challenging, with progress punctuated by periods of crisis and regression and, despite the longitudinal nature of this study, the extent to which improved outcomes for many research participants will be sustained in the longer-term and without continuing interventions remains uncertain.

There was a stark contrast between the perceived efficacy of intensive and holistic support packages (including qualified support for the sanctions and conditionality elements of these) used in anti-social behaviour and family intervention projects; with the almost universal rejection of the efficacy of the imposition of automatic and depersonalised employment-related benefit sanctions, which many research participants were also subject to during the course of this study. None of the participants reported that such sanctions had been a trigger for positive behaviour change; rather they had exacerbated their vulnerability and, indeed, had sometimes been directly counterproductive to the aims and practices of supportive interventions.

This is not a surprising finding given that this study has confirmed the complex forms of vulnerability and marginality of many individuals subject to family interventions; the centrality of sustained, personalised and holistic forms of working with them to achieving positive behaviour change; and the substantial underlying issues and barriers that need to be addressed before prioritising entry to the labour market.

The ethics of interventions

There was an acknowledgement among the majority of research participants that ASB needed to be addressed and that individuals should take responsibility for their conduct, and, therefore, that sanctions were, in principle, fair:

“ From my point of view, I don’t think they’ve really got an option [but] to make it [ASB] stop happening... so I think it was fair enough [to be given an ASBO]. ”

(MALE, SCOTLAND SUBJECT TO ASBO, WAVE B)

The research participants argued that there should always be a tiered and phased approach to sanctions, which should always be imposed in tandem with support packages and appropriate for individuals’ circumstances. However, research participants were almost unanimously opposed to employment-related benefit sanctions. Although they supported the need for individuals to seek work, they argued that sanctions failed to recognise barriers to employment or the specific circumstances of individuals. Sanctions were viewed as exacerbating poverty and being counterproductive:

“ They stop my benefits, then I’m going shoplifting to survive, to get money. Then I get arrested and go to jail and then they’ve destroyed [my life]. Yes, I am to blame for my own actions but they stopped my money... this is the only way on earth right now I can get money to survive. ”

(MALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO PROBATION, WAVE B)

“ I don’t think it is [ethical] because all right you could say that there are some people out there that are out to just milk everything they can get, but there are genuine people out there who really are having a hard time and they need support more than they need to be penalised to do things. ”

(FEMALE, ENGLAND, SUBJECT TO FIP, WAVE A)

Conclusions

Achieving positive behaviour change for individuals subject to anti-social behaviour or intensive family interventions is inherently difficult and complex, given their range of vulnerabilities and the often problematic history of interactions with agencies and services. The underlying causes of ASB and family vulnerability are multiple and deep-rooted, with often very challenging household circumstances, and very limited purchase for rational choice-based incentives. The combination of support and sanction, and forms of conditionality underpinning these, are long-standing in this field of policy and practice.

Our findings have confirmed much of the extensive existing evidence about the circumstances of these individuals, the forms of intervention that are effective and the complex interaction of the support and sanction elements of these interventions. Our study found that personalised, holistic and sustained interventions, based on a key project worker and whole-family model and access to a range of specialised services that can address underlying causal factors, are strongly associated with positive behaviour change. Our study also found that while sanctions are rarely effective in their own right, the use of formal sanctioning can act as the trigger for referral to support and facilitate individuals acknowledging the need to change and engaging in interventions to achieve this. The forms of this change in conduct and circumstances are varied and there is a need to recognise the significance of softer and more hidden positive outcomes that form the basis for more tangible and transformative behaviour change.

Our study has enabled a further understanding of three less-researched areas: firstly, the longitudinal elements of behaviour change over a period of three years (revealing how change is seldom linear); and secondly, the introduction of benefits sanctions that are often deployed against individuals already subject to other forms of sanction and welfare conditionality. Our study found no evidence that such benefit sanctions offered an effective new mechanism for achieving behaviour change and, indeed, the way that such benefit sanctions operate is often contrary to established best practice in ASB-related interventions. Finally, our study examined research participants' perspectives on the ethics of sanctions and support. While individuals were often concerned about how sanctions had been operationalised in their own cases, there was majority support for the principle of sanctions to address problematic behaviour, though this support was conditional on appropriate support also being provided simultaneously.

NOTE ON METHODS

This findings report is based on interviews with 23 individuals who participated in two or three waves of interviews between November 2014 and May 2017. Of these, 12 were female and 11 were male; 18 were living in England and five in Scotland. The majority were White British, with two respondents from BME groups. Their ages ranged from 21 to 60 years old. Those with dependent children made up approximately half (12) the sample with all others being single (11). Most individuals (15) lived in social housing, three were living with friends or relatives, two were living in the private rented sector, two were in hostels and one was an owner-occupier. Three individuals were in employment. Eight individuals were in the Support Group for ESA, with two being in the WRAG. Five individuals claimed Income Support and four claimed JSA. No participants were receiving Universal Credit. A third of the sample (eight) has been subject to a benefit sanction.

The participants had complex needs including poor physical and mental health, substance misuse, periods spent homeless, family problems, childhoods in care and domestic violence and six individuals had served a custodial sentence. The most frequent types of interventions experienced were ASBOs (10, with one CRASBO) and FIPs (nine). Some individuals had been subject to ABCs and housing-related interventions including notices seeking possession, injunctions and Scottish Short Secure Tenancies.

Key policy recommendations

- The Scottish and UK Governments, local authorities and their partner organisations should continue to develop and resource intensive intervention projects, based on a key worker model. This should be complemented by the retention and development of skilled project workers and access to a range of specialist support services. In particular, there is a need to enhance support services for individuals who have experienced trauma and bereavement.
- Legal and financial sanctions and forms of conditionality linked to anti-social behaviour should always be used in tandem with support packages that provide the basis for individuals to adhere to the conditions imposed by these sanctions.
- Government should recognise how employment and disability-related benefit sanctions have exacerbated the vulnerability of marginalised individuals and significantly increased the workloads and challenges for agencies and organisations working with them. Although this research found no evidence that benefit sanctions were related to positive behaviour change, if such sanctions are to be retained, their use should be more closely aligned to the forms of personalised support already commonly used in combination with anti-social behaviour-related sanctions.
- The evaluations and assessment of anti-social behaviour and family support interventions, by both central government and commissioning bodies, should acknowledge the centrality of soft outcomes as essential building blocks to transformative outcomes and that significant behaviour change and progress may often have been achieved even where all hard outcome measures have not been delivered. In particular, there should be recognition that outcomes related to employment are not always appropriate, and certainly should not be prioritised, in intensive interventions.
- There remains a need for a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the long-term sustainability of behaviour change post-intervention periods.

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