

## **Unintended Consequences: Hounslow Homes Anti Social Behaviour Service<sup>1</sup>**

The astonishing paradox of the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) industry is that it encourages bad behaviour. Not bad behaviour on the part of those it was designed to sanction. Instead the behaviour has come from those dedicated, well-intentioned people whose job it is to tackle the problem. It's not their fault. Instead, this behaviour is one of the many unintended consequences caused by how ASB work has been designed. The net result of these faulty designs has been to discourage people from taking responsibility for nurturing responsible and tolerant relationships with their neighbours. Coupled with this, the design of work has led to slow, unresponsive service, which reduces the chances of successful resolutions to problems whilst simultaneously increasing the likelihood that problems escalate in seriousness. However, it doesn't have to be this way. One London organisation has been demonstrating a different way of approaching the problem. This is Hounslow Homes' story.

Hounslow Homes is an Arms-Length Management Organisation (ALMO) managing the London Borough of Hounslow's social housing stock (16,000 properties). Like many other public sector organisations under pressure to save money, they had opted to centralise their services to make them cheaper. Call centre operatives were set up to take calls from residents (at the front-end), log them onto an IT system designed to manage work (a Customer Relationship Management [CRM] system) and pass it onto specialists to process (in the back-office). Each stage was controlled by the CRM system, with built-in targets, assessment points and reviews. In this design, Hounslow Homes' ASB service is structured identically to services in other housing associations or local authorities.

Jill Gale, Director of Housing, says that when she realised that the changes had led to both unhappy tenants and staff, she decided to think differently about the problem. Jill and her team began by studying the ASB service as a system. To do this required managers and staff to go and listen to the demands that customers were placing upon the service. This can be an uncomfortable and difficult experience: being able to face reality from your customers' perspective can be a true test of managerial mettle.

What the team found was that a large volume (74%) of calls were from customers chasing officers to obtain service (i.e. failure demand - 'demand caused by a failure to do something or do something right for the customer' [Seddon 2003 p26]). This was puzzling, as Hounslow were meeting a target that all calls must be responded to within 24 hours nearly 100% of the time. When the team looked into this in greater depth they discovered that it could take up to two or three weeks for someone to

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actually get through to speak to an officer. Quickly, they realised that officers were seen to meet the target by calling the resident back, even if they couldn't get through. The messages left on the resident's answer machine triggered another attempt at contact from the resident. The loop would thus begin again. It could take several attempts to speak to an officer. This discovery helped Jill and her team to understand why residents were complaining that they found it difficult to get through.

Each shock was a new lesson learnt. They realised that when residents complained about anti-social behaviour, unless the resident was vulnerable, staff would not attend incidents. In fact nothing would progress unless the complainant had provided written consent that they wanted the complaint to progress. From the start, the alleged perpetrator was treated as guilty, being issued with threatening letters, treated with suspicion and instructed to attend the office for an interview. Overall the service was slow, formal and not designed to solve problems. Whenever an officer did make a decision, it had to be signed-off at a special monthly panel and on the CRM system. As a result, it could be as long as two years before a case was resolved.

Often, the original problem was left unresolved and the case had either been escalated or died away. Officers were resorting to formal means of resolution through the use of anti social behaviour orders (ASBOs) or injunctions as this was easier and quicker than actually resolving the problem. Also, officers were being led into treating as many problems as possible as ASB in order to meet performance monitoring requirements. The cumulative impact of all these factors contributed to an environment where residents no longer took the responsibility upon themselves to form good relationships with their neighbours, expecting the agencies of the state to step in and mediate whenever there were problems.

As the team's thinking changed, they designed a new service which was radically different. Gone were the targets, policies and procedures and standards that warped performance. Instead, the team were enabled to make judgements based upon purpose and simple principles. Calls now came directly to the team. Officers would actively listen and then be able to understand what was really being asked for, instead of having to follow the CRM screen prompts. The focus was upon face-to-face contact, attending quickly and helping residents to take responsibility for solving their problems together where this was possible. Sekandar Ravi, an estate manager working in the newly rolled-in team, said that, 'Before, we were always ticking boxes and the focus was on meeting targets rather than doing what matters, and we lost the customer in the whole thing.' And after the intervention? 'Now we are getting real engagement, eye-to-eye contact and a firm handshake' and 'it feels that we have actually done something and it feels good.' This is different from before where 'our brains weren't wanted.' His colleague Tracey Barclay agreed, 'You don't realise how complicated it is, the pressure was the targets, send this out, click this, it has gone red on the system.'

As for Jill, her management approach changed significantly. Before, she was quite remote from the work. Staff who asked her for help with a problem post-intervention would find that she spends lots of time in the work to thoroughly understand the problem before she would take any actions.

Things became noticeably different. They were receiving fewer complaints, and the ones that they did get were old cases which had previously been unresolved. Jill said that, post-intervention, evening meetings in their part of the borough were no longer dominated by ASB.

The relationship that staff had with residents also changed, to become more positive. People brought in chocolates for the team! One resident called in tears and when asked what the staff member had done wrong, she replied, 'I am crying because I am happy! ... You helped me resolve the problem so quickly!' Staff now had direct contact with residents. As they became better at listening and giving service users what mattered, the volume of failure demand into the system plummeted. The focus was now on doing the right thing by the service user, helping them to resolve the problem thoroughly, face-to-face. As Jill was able to say of the redesigned ASB service, 'We have re-humanised it.'