



# Words Matter: Is It “Just” Anti-Social Behaviour?

A guide on best practices for communicating with victims of anti-social behaviour.

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**ASB HELP**®

Your Voice Matters

Endorsed by



## Foreword

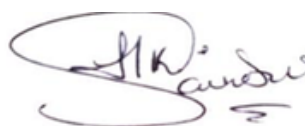
Supporting victims of anti-social behaviour (ASB) is a complex and deeply important responsibility. For those affected, ASB is rarely “just” a series of minor incidents — it can profoundly disrupt their sense of safety, wellbeing, and connection to their community. As practitioners, how we communicate with victims is just as critical as the actions we take. The words we choose have the power to either build trust and resilience or to inadvertently deepen isolation and distress.

This guide has been created to empower you — the frontline professionals and practitioners — with practical, trauma-informed language and approaches. It offers phrases to help you engage with victims in ways that validate their experiences and encourage open, supportive dialogue. It also addresses the challenges many face when navigating multiple agencies and services, providing strategies to keep victims feeling supported throughout the process.

We know that no two situations are the same, and this guide is not a script but a toolkit — a resource to be adapted with empathy, respect, and professionalism. By using it, you are taking an essential step towards changing the conversation around ASB, ensuring victims are truly heard and helped.

*Thank you for your commitment to making a difference in the lives of those affected by anti-social behaviour.*

**Harvinder Saimbhi, CEO**

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'H. Saimbhi', with a stylized flourish underneath.



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*"This new guide will help frontline professionals deliver improved support to victims of anti-social behaviour through practical, victim-centred approaches. This isn't just nuisance behaviour – it damages communities, and people's mental health, left unchallenged it can lead to serious crime. Our government's Safer Streets Mission demonstrates our absolute determination to crack down on anti-social behaviour and ensure victims receive the support and justice they deserve."*

**Dame Diana Johnson, Minister for Crime and Policing**

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*"This guide highlights what many victims of anti-social behaviour know all too well — that being dismissed or told their suffering is 'low-level' can sometimes be as damaging as the ordeal itself. Language matters. By improving how practitioners engage with victims, this guide offers a meaningful step towards ensuring they are met with compassion, clarity and action."*

**Baroness Helen Newlove, Victims' Commissioner**

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*"Words matter. What we say to people matters. The way we leave people feeling matters. It is not 'just' anti-social behaviour. That is why I am pleased to endorse this concise, practical guide of things to remember when speaking to victims of anti-social behaviour."*

**Andrew Prophet, ASB Lead for National Police Chief's Council**

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## Wider research shows...

Wider research shows that preconceptions about anti-social behaviour impact the language used by practitioners.

HMICFRS's [PEEL report](#) on anti-social behaviour showed cases of ASB being referred to as "low-level crimes". They heard phrases such as "just anti-social behaviour". A call handler in one force told them they would record "the serious crime... such as criminal damage".

Other research has demonstrated how victims feel dismissed by authorities despite agency ethos' stating "we are here to help" ([Rodgers, 2022](#)).

The Victims' Commissioner's report: [Still Living a Nightmare](#), further demonstrated how victims felt dismissed by authorities. Victims stated being told to "please just ignore it and it'll stop" and "what do you expect us to do?"

## Our research shows...

Victims often do not feel listened to by practitioners involved in their case.

We surveyed victims and practitioners and found:



71% of victims say they **never** felt heard by practitioners.

Victims referred to feeling "gaslit" - with one victim stating they were told that they are being "paranoid".

Practitioners referred to multiple ways in which victim-blaming may occur when communicating with victims. For example, using common phrases like:

"You're the only one complaining"

"If it was that bad, they would have called the police"

Victims and practitioners agreed that professionals often refer to anti-social behaviour as '**low-level**'. This made victims feel dismissed.

**"It's just low-level  
anti-social  
behaviour"**



As we can see from research, the words we use as practitioners can have a profound effect on victims of anti-social behaviour. Research suggests that the language we use is due to our mindset. Therefore it is important that we discuss the impact of anti-social behaviour, to challenge problematic perceptions around ASB.







**Until it's not...**

## **Anti-social behaviour impacts victims by...**

Anti-social behaviour is defined as: *"conduct that has caused – or is likely to cause – harassment, alarm or distress to any person."* However, when ASB is prevalent around the home, we look at *"nuisance and annoyance"* as a threshold.

ASB can potentially effect multiple elements of day-to-day life. A single incident may appear to be "trivial" or low priority compared to other crimes. But, when incidents occur frequently, for days, weeks, months on end - the cumulative impact on an individual can be devastating.

Let's take noise nuisance for example. A neighbour plays loud music everyday from 11pm until 3am. The individual on the receiving end of the noise may experience constant sleep deprivation, leading to:

-  Mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety
-  Cognitive difficulties such as memory issues
-  Physical health difficulties
-  Relationship breakdowns
-  Sick leave from work, potentially losing their job or work
-  Financial difficulties from lost work

Now imagine having experienced this impact and when turning to agencies for help, you are met with “what do you expect us to do?” or being told that your report is “low-level”.

**That is why our words matter.**






## Who can be impacted by anti-social behaviour?

**Anyone.** Anti-social behaviour does not discriminate. Anti-social behaviour can impact an individual regardless of gender, class, race or vulnerabilities. In fact, research shows that vulnerable individuals are *more* likely to experience anti-social behaviour.

Therefore, as practitioners, it is important that we consider our language and adapt it to meet the victim’s needs.

### Who is this guide for?

This guide is designed for anyone that interacts with victims of anti-social behaviour. That can include, but is not limited to:

-  Police staff
-  Council staff
-  Housing association staff
-  Healthcare staff
-  Charity staff e.g. Victim Support



# What to avoid

We understand that a minority of cases may fall under 'persistent/unreasonable reporting'. However, this does not represent the majority of cases where victims experience harm and distress regularly due to anti-social behaviour.

In this section we will discuss some phrases to avoid when communicating with victims, to ensure they feel heard and respected. Our 'try to avoid' sections include real phrases from victims' lived experiences and is influenced by the large amount of enquiries we receive directly from individuals experiencing ASB, as well as our lived experience focus group.



## Avoid diminishing language

The language we use has the power to either validate a victim's experience — or unintentionally dismiss it. Phrases like "It's just ASB", "It's low-level", or "It happens everywhere" may seem harmless or routine, but to someone already feeling isolated or overwhelmed, they can feel minimising and deeply invalidating.

For victims, the emotional and psychological impact of anti-social behaviour is very real — regardless of whether it meets a formal threshold for enforcement. Diminishing language can cause victims to shut down, withdraw from support, or lose trust in services altogether.

This section offers practical alternatives to commonly used phrases that may unintentionally downplay a victim's experience. By making small changes in how we speak, we can help victims feel heard, respected, and supported — which is essential to effective, trauma-informed practice.

"Anything that minimises the experiences and impact of the victims will cause a negative impact. I think it is possible to listen to victims whilst being impartial, as I know practitioners often need to be."

Practitioner input

### Try avoiding:

"It's just anti-social behaviour"  
"It's only ASB"  
"It's tit-for-tat"  
"It's petty"  
"It's low-level"

### Instead try:

"You've done the right thing by reporting this."  
  
"We know ASB can really affect someone's wellbeing — thank you for sharing this with us."

## 2

## Avoid dismissive language

Dismissive language, even when unintentional, can shut down a conversation before it truly begins. Phrases like “There’s nothing we can do” or “You’re the only one complaining” can leave victims feeling ignored, disbelieved, or burdensome.

When someone finds the courage to report anti-social behaviour, they are often already feeling anxious or isolated. How we respond in that moment has a lasting impact. Dismissive language can reinforce the idea that their experience doesn't matter — or worse, that it's their fault.

It's important to note that there is often a misconception that ASB must be evidenced to a criminal standard (beyond reasonable doubt). This is not true. Most tools available to tackle ASB are civil remedies, meaning that the lower standard of proof applies (on the balance of probabilities).

This section explores how to replace responses with language that is supportive, honest, and empowering. It's not about having all the answers — it's about making the victim feel heard, respected, and never alone in navigating the next steps.

### Try avoiding:

“If it was that bad, you would have called the police”  
“If it was that bad, there would be more complaints”  
“You all need to stop reporting each other”  
“There’s nothing we can do; you have no evidence”  
“You’re the only one complaining”

### Instead try:

“Evidence can be helpful, but it’s not the only thing we consider.”  
  
“Let’s talk about what information you have and how we can support you moving forward.”

“We were told “it’s only effecting you as an individual not the wider community so it’s not ASB.”

Victim input

“Dismissive language and terminology, reluctance to offer any supportive conversation. They need to understand that the daily threat of vile behaviour has a massive effect on mental health.”

Victim input



### 3

## Avoid redirecting

When victims of anti-social behaviour reach out for help, they are often met with a complex system of agencies, policies, and procedures. While it may be accurate that a particular issue falls outside one team's remit, phrases like "It's not a police matter", "That's housing's responsibility", or "We can't do anything" can leave people feeling abandoned, confused, or even blamed for asking for support.

Redirecting — even when well-intentioned — can feel like being passed from agency to agency with no one taking ownership. Victims may already feel powerless; being redirected without care can reinforce that sense of being unseen or unimportant.

This section offers guidance on how to respond when another service may be better placed to help — without leaving the person feeling dismissed or alone. By maintaining a sense of shared responsibility, even when signposting, we can reassure victims that they are not being left to figure things out on their own.

### Try avoiding:

"It's not a police matter"  
"We can't do anything"  
"It's not our problem"  
"What do you expect us to do about it?"

*"We need to listen to our victims and support them. There needs to be less dismissal of cases when false allegations are made maliciously and we need a 'nip it in the bud' attitude, rather than to let these cases rumble on for years and years."*

Practitioner input

### Instead try:

"Our agency may not take formal action here, but let's explore what we can do to support you."

"Let's look at what options are available and what support is possible — even small steps can help."

"That falls under another agency's remit, but I can help you understand who to speak to and why."

If you have capacity, making a referral to the appropriate agency on behalf of the victim can make them feel even more supported.

## 4

## Avoid gaslighting

Gaslighting — whether intentional or not — happens when someone's reality is questioned, dismissed, or minimised in a way that makes them doubt their own experiences. In the context of anti-social behaviour, phrases like “You’re being paranoid”, “You’re overreacting”, or “That’s not really happening” can be deeply damaging.

Many victims already question themselves before coming forward. They may worry they’re making a fuss, misinterpreting situations, or won’t be believed. When practitioners use language that invalidates those concerns, even subtly, it can reinforce feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and isolation.

This section explores how to avoid language that may feel gaslighting or accusatory, and instead use words that validate, reassure, and support victims. Practitioners don’t need to have all the answers — but it’s essential to believe what victims are telling us and respond with empathy and care.

### Try avoiding:

“You’re being paranoid”  
“You’re overreacting”

“Environmental health officer said I should seek mental health care to another officer, like I was imagining it, later other neighbours came forward”

Victim input

### Instead try:

If you feel that an individual’s health and well-being has been impacted by their experiences, gently signpost them to local services for support. For example:

“There are services that can help you cope with how this is impacting your wellbeing, if that would be helpful.”

“I can see this is really affecting you — thank you for sharing it with me.”

## Extra tips

- Avoid using jargon/acronyms - keep it simple!
- Avoid referring to victims as “complainants”, use a term like “reporter” instead.

# Taking a harm-centred approach

A harm-centred approach to communication involves focusing on the harm caused to the individual, not just the incidents at hand. Victims have told us that even just feeling listened to and validated can make them feel supported.

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## **Educating others**

Remember to challenge misconceptions about anti-social behaviour. Let's change the narrative.

## **Carry out risk assessments**

Remember to carry out ASB risk assessments to identify any hidden patterns of harm and ensure the right level of support/intervention is put in place.

## **Manage expectations**

Ensure you manage expectations from the get-go. Make sure victims know what to expect from different processes. For example, managing expectations around timeframes.

## **Collaborative working**

Ensure you collaborate not only with other agencies, but also with the victim. For example, develop/share the action plan with them. This builds trust.

## **Good case management**

Good case management allows practitioners to support victims throughout an often lengthy and emotionally draining process.

## **Follow up**

Regular contact with victims can have a big impact. Even if there are no updates, make sure to let the victim know, so then they do not feel forgotten.

## **Addressing difficult topics**

Sometimes, victims of anti-social behaviour may experience mental health difficulties as a result. It is important that we approach these conversations tactfully and respectfully. If you aren't sure how to manage these conversations, try linking in with a healthcare professional for support.



# Citations and resources

Below you will find the references for the articles mentioned in this guide, as well as some other useful resources.

[Victim's Commissioner's report - 'Still living a nightmare: Understanding the experiences of victims of anti-social behaviour'](#)

[HMICFRS's PEEL report: 'The policing response to antisocial behaviour: PEEL spotlight report'](#)

[Rodgers, 2022 - 'Examining victims' experiences of Community Protection Notices in managing anti-social behaviour.'](#)

[Home Office - 'Antisocial behaviour: Guidance for professionals'](#)

[Green & Burton ASB Associates - 'Effectively managing neighbour disputes'](#)

[Housing Ombudsman - 'Anti-social behaviour'](#)

## ASB Help resources

[FOI Report - 'The ASB Case Review - the victims' voice or a box-ticking exercise?'](#)

[Practitioners Hub](#)

[Victims Hub](#)

[The ASB Help PLEDGE](#)

