

Community Payback

Over 120,000 hours of compulsory unpaid work is done by offenders each year in West Mercia Probation Area.

A whole range of projects are undertaken by offenders working to make their local community a better place to live in. 'Community Payback' gives the general public a chance to have a say about what work gets carried out. Here are two examples of recent unpaid work projects.

Offenders Help Construct Straw House

Offenders performing unpaid work as part of their community orders helped to construct a straw house for Ludlow's Green Festival. The straw house was formally opened by the new Mayor of Ludlow, Councillor Marie Glaze, as her first official engagement.

A work party of six offenders and a supervisor worked on the construction for six days. The house, which is based in the castle gardens, is 3.5m square

with a chestnut roof. The work party erected the bales, clad the building with clay and lime and put the roof on. It is an example of an 'eco-building' constructed almost entirely of low cost, local materials. It demonstrates a tried and tested sustainable building technique which requires limited building skills and small capital outlay.

The work party worked alongside Colin Richards, Conservation Officer for South Shropshire Council, other council workers and volunteers. Colin said, "They have done a tremendous job and we have really enjoyed having them with us. There has been a great camaraderie in doing the project. They have been very enthused by it and some of them have really shone with their construction and rendering skills."

He continued, "Once we explained to them what it was all about, they were all really up for it and it gave them a great sense of purpose. It has been a very enjoyable experience with a common endeavour".

One of the offenders working on the project was a builder and his skills were

particularly useful, he said, "It's been a really interesting job to do. We have started from scratch and have got an end result and all in a very short space of time. It's good that the project has created a lot of interest with the local people".

Offenders Help Clear Up After Floods

Some of the worst floods ever recorded hit the UK in July 2007. Many parts of West Mercia were affected by the sheer volume of rain but particularly Worcestershire where the rivers Severn and Wye burst their banks. Upton-upon-Severn in Worcestershire was totally cut off. Once the rain stopped and the water subsided the big clear-up began and probation was on hand to help out.

A work party of five offenders and a supervisor spent several days working alongside residents and volunteers, clearing up the streets and re-painting.

Ian Hampton, Probation Service Officer, said, "We have done quite a lot of work in Upton in the past including painting public benches, bollards and railings on the waterfront and these will all need to be done again as the silt has damaged the paint work. We are happy we can help out and will do what we can to get Upton back to normal".

The Mayor of Upton, Councillor Tim Perry, made the plea for help, he said, "I contacted probation to help out as we have worked with them previously and we use them as often as we can. I have the highest praises for the work they have done in Upton."

He continued, "We have genuine jobs we need doing and we really appreciate getting them done as we would never cope with it all ourselves. The workers are keen and willing to help, the workmanship is great and they really get stuck into whatever they are working on."



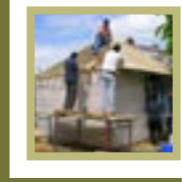
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News from West Mercia Probation

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Accolade for West Mercia - Trust Status

After six years as part of the National Probation Service, West Mercia has been selected to become an Independent Probation Trust.

Six of the forty-two probation areas have been chosen to form the first pathfinder wave of trusts, under the new Offender Management Act.

Since West Mercia was formed in 2001 it has been part of the National Probation Service responsible to the National Probation Directorate in London. This new move will mean that West Mercia is released from this arrangement and will be given more freedom. West Mercia will be working with the Ministry of Justice to work out what increased freedom will mean and how devolution will work.

An early implication is that the Chief Officer will become the Chief Executive of the Trust and will no longer report to the National Director of Probation but to

the Trust Board through the Chair. Trust Chief Executive designate, David Chantler, welcomed the selection of West Mercia, saying "This is an endorsement of the strategy that we have followed over the past six years, which has been about meeting the needs of our local communities through innovative projects like 'Growing out of Crime' and 'Acclaim', aimed at the most prolific offenders and so reduce offending".

He continued, "As we move towards Trust status we will want to involve our partners and stakeholders in the process – the whole point of an independent trust is for it to be sensitive to local needs, so this edition of 'proactive' is only the start of a sustained process of informing and consulting that will be carried out over the next few months and beyond."

Current Board Chair and designated first Chair of the Trust, James Kelly, welcomed the likelihood that Trusts will get three year contracts from the

Regional Offender Manager, with greater flexibility to plan and budget over a longer term than the current annual budget and planning cycles.

West Mercia becomes a Trust on 1 April 2008, and it is hoped that all of the other probation areas will attain that status by April 2011. The six pathfinders will have a responsibility to work with the centre to work out further freedoms and to ensure that even though there may be no overall National Probation Service, as we have known it since 2001, there will still be a national network of Probation Trusts to ensure consistency. We will also be working with other areas to share the learning from being a Trust so that as many of them move as quickly as possible through the transition process.

The Probation Director, Roger Hill, has made it very clear that he wants all 42 areas to become public sector trusts at the end of this process, and both Chair and Chief in West Mercia are committed to helping to achieve this.



Pictured: Offenders help construct a straw house in Ludlow.



Suggest a Project

If you have a suggestion for a project you would like to have carried out in your community please visit the Community Payback section of our website and complete the form. Please note projects must meet certain criteria which are outlined on the website. www.westmerciaprobation.org.uk

Contact Us:

If you have any comments or suggestions for future editions, please contact Jackie Bell, PR Officer, 01562 748375 ext 253, or jackie.bell@west-mercia.probation.gsi.gov.uk

A Century of Cutting Crime - 1907-2007

Our Heritage

This year probation celebrates its centenary and the introduction of the Probation of Offenders Act 1907, which laid the foundations of the modern service.

It all began in 1876 when Frederic Rainer, a London printer, gave a gift of five shillings to the Church of England Temperance Society; this was the start of what would become the National Probation Service. Rainer hoped that the money would be used to rescue people who fell into crime through drunkenness, regarded as the main social evil of the time and the cause of most petty crime. That year the Society appointed its first special missionary whose role was to deflect petty criminals from the capital's overflowing prisons at a time when jail was the punishment for first offenders – men, women and children.

Over 30 years later, in 1907, the Probation of Offenders Act was introduced. The Act turned voluntary pioneering into statutory responsibility. It enabled courts to release offenders on probation, introduced a probation order and probation officers and used the phrase 'advise, assist and befriend'.

In its first two decades, the majority of staff were part-time. It took an Act in 1925 to recommend the appointment of full-time officers with proper training.

By 1957, the service's golden jubilee, there were approximately 30,000 people on probation.

Change accelerated over the next 50 years. The 1960s saw an increase in work with offenders inside or leaving prison. The 1970s saw the introduction of community service, now unpaid

work. By the 1980s the probation service pioneered the notion of getting offenders into drug treatment as a way of reducing offending.

The 1990s were a decade of great change. The 1991 Criminal Justice Act introduced National Standards and the early release of prisoners on licence. Change continued into the new millennium with the establishment of the National Probation Service. The 54 probation services were reduced to 42 probation areas, each managed by a probation board. Three years later the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) was established to oversee both prisons and probation.

Today, in West Mercia Probation Area, there are over 450 staff. Each year they supervise over 3000 cases. Over 3500 reports are written for the Courts and over 120,000 hours of unpaid work in the community are supervised.

More change is yet to come, with the Offender Management Act which will turn boards into trusts and open the provision of services to the voluntary and private sectors. West Mercia has been selected to be one of the first wave of trusts which will take effect from April 2008.

Centenary Celebrations

To celebrate the centenary there were celebrations both locally and nationally. Centenary day, 11 June, was marked with a service at Westminster Abbey for 2,000 people. Current and retired staff were invited.

In West Mercia over 220 staff attended a Centenary themed conference at Ludlow Racecourse. Geese Theatre Company performed a very lively production and guest speakers were Diane Baderin, Diversity and Inclusion for Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Trust and Mark Johnson, an ex-offender from Kidderminster who now works for the Prince's Trust and advises Probation Boards.

Margaret's a Winner

The winner of the prestigious High Sheriffs' Award for the centenary year was Margaret Fraser, Probation Officer at HMP Hewell Grange, in recognition of her performance above and beyond normal expectation. She said, "I am absolutely delighted to receive the award and feel very proud. I am in the twilight of my career now and it is nice to have been recognised for the work I have done over the years".

Margaret has been with the service since 1983 when she started as a volunteer. She qualified as a Probation Officer in 1987 and has worked in the Kidderminster and Redditch teams she has also spent considerable time working in the prisons on the Redditch campus.

The joint runners up for the individual award were Lee Heighway, Probation Service Officer, Redditch and Anna Pearce, Probation Service Officer, Shrewsbury.

The team award was won by the Probation team in HMP Long Lartin followed by the Telford team in second place and HMYOI Stoke Heath Probation team in third place.

The awards were presented at the annual staff conference by the High Sheriff of Shropshire, Meriel Afia and the High Sheriff of Herefordshire and Worcestershire, John Yorke.



Pictured above: Margaret Fraser, 2007 High Sheriffs' Award Winner.

The Chief's Column - ReConnect

Gaining Trust status has felt a strange process, as I have been away from West Mercia since April, and before using this column to describe what I have been doing, I want to thank the Executive Team and the Interim Chief Officer, Roger McGarva, for all the work they put in on what was a most exhaustive application process, and the Board Chair, James Kelly, who heroically found a route out of flooded Worcestershire so that we could keep the appointment for the final interview.

For nearly five years West Mercia has been the host for the regional Connect project, providing a resettlement service to short sentence prisoners. It had always been hoped that Connect would end when Custody Plus was introduced and that lessons learned from Connect could be applied to this new sentence. However, Custody Plus has been postponed indefinitely but the reasons that lay behind it are still powerful; indeed they are the same considerations that led us to develop Connect in the first place, chief amongst these being the extraordinarily high re-offending rate for this group. The average re-offending rate for all released prisoners is 60%, but for short sentences it is an average of 75%, increasing to 95% for the shortest sentences. This is not surprising really as short sentences combine maximum disruption of positive factors such as employment and accommodation, with minimal positive help, i.e. too short a time in prison to benefit from programmes or training and no post-release supervision.

In the West of Midlands region we have developed Connect to combine pre-release motivational work and post-release mentoring by volunteers.

The Director of Probation would like to see this approach rolled out nationally, and he would also like the same sort of European Social Funding that we have used to support the initiative. So between April and October, I have been leading a small development team drawn from probation, prisons and the voluntary sector to refine Connect and to explore funding streams.

The result is a programme that we have called ReConnect, in honour of the original, and we now await both funding decisions and work within the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) on priorities for the coming years, both of which should be known by the end of the year. We are hopeful that we should have ReConnect projects covering at least half the country.

So that's what I have been doing, away from West Mercia, and given that short sentence prisoners drive so much volume offending it should have a significant effect in helping probation and NOMS deliver on the reducing re-offending aim of the service.

David Chantler, Chief Officer



Pictured above: A typical court scene in the 1920s.

Employment, Training and Education for Offenders



STEP into Employment

West Mercia Probation Area offers an employment, training and education provision for offenders under its supervision.

The scheme is partly funded by PS Plus, using European Social Funding, and is called 'STEP into Employment' (STEP is short for Skills, Training, Education and Placements). It focuses on helping offenders achieve the skills necessary to gain sustainable employment. Offenders are referred to the scheme by their Probation Officers and it forms part of their supervision.

Each area of West Mercia has its own Community Link Worker to work with offenders. They can offer the following activities:-

- One hour employment and training assessment, information and advice
- Referral to in-house provision
- Referral to further education and community education
- Careers advice and job search
- CV writing and applying for jobs

- Disclosure of convictions
- Communication skills
- Vocational courses
- Work placements
- Skills for life
- Referral to external agencies for housing, benefit and debt advice.

Community Link Workers compile an action plan for individuals based on their need to improve skills and address barriers to employment. As individuals progress towards becoming work ready they are referred to the Employment Development Officer (EDO), Chandry Mistry.

The role of the EDO is to assist with pursuing work opportunities that will lead to an offer of a job. In some instances a work trial is more appropriate which provides a reference and work experience for the very first time.

The employer facing activity has proved very successful and has secured job opportunities for individuals who have previously found it extremely difficult to find work.

Working with Local Businesses

Probation staff attended the annual Business Expo, hosted by Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce in September, to target the message that 'businesses' involvement can reduce re-offending'.

Chandry Mistry, Employment Development Officer for West Mercia Probation Area, explained that employers have a key role to play and a stakeholder interest in finding ways of contributing to the rehabilitation of offenders. There is convincing evidence to show that there are business benefits for including ex-offenders in targeted recruitment programmes. Not only to address skill shortages and fill job vacancies, but also regarding issues of corporate social responsibility and working towards the creation and maintenance of inclusive and economically successful communities in which people and businesses can prosper.

West Mercia Probation have introduced a Corporate Alliance Scheme in order to raise awareness that the opportunity exists for businesses to play a huge role in bringing past offenders back into society. This will not only reduce crime but provide business solutions such as recruiting those with the appropriate skills to fill skills gaps.

Mike Ashton, Chief Executive of the Chamber of Commerce said, "We hope businesses will investigate the opportunities open to them, whether that is in employing offenders, mentoring or contributing to training efforts. There are numerous testimonials as to the benefits of working with past offenders in this way."

Two-thirds of HR Managers report a positive experience in employing offenders and this, coupled with the ultimate benefits of driving down crime in the area, should be the incentive to attract employers from across West Mercia to get involved. If you want to find out more e-mail Chandry.mistry@west-mercia.probation.gsi.gov.uk

Case Study - David

David had been unemployed for nearly seven years; he had been rejected from a number of employment positions and he often felt that he would never secure a job again. David's criminal convictions had become a real barrier when completing application forms.

David was referred to a Community Link Worker with West Mercia Probation Area who discussed ways to carry out disclosure of convictions to prospective employers. The Employment Development Officer, Chandry Mistry, also met with David and quickly established that David was interested in securing a career in the Motor Trade. David and Chandry worked together and did intensive job searches in the local press, Job Centre and on the internet but without much success.

Having explored the usual channels Chandry resorted to cold calling local garages in the area. Once more the usual barriers that David was very familiar with presented themselves. The employers always appeared unsure, due to the fear of the unknown of employing an ex-offender.

Chandry called the Nationwide Autocentre. The local manager had a very refreshing and positive approach to employing ex-offenders and he said, 'The company's policy is that every candidate is taken on their own merit and we don't discriminate'.

David was interviewed by Nationwide Autocentre and was successful in securing a position. The local manager has recently completed a review with David and he said "David has become an invaluable member of the team and we don't know what we would do without him".

Ian Baillie, HR Manager for Nationwide Autocentres Limited said, "For us the experience has been positive and we are happy to continue to partner the Probation Service and provide ex-offenders with real job opportunities".



Pictured from left to right: Ian Baillie, HR Manager, Nationwide Autocentres Ltd, Chandry Mistry, Employment Development Officer, West Mercia Probation, Mike Aston, Chief Executive, Chamber of Commerce, Nicky Griffiths, Head of Commercial Operations, Chamber of Commerce.

Controlling Anger and Learning to Manage it

Controlling Anger and Learning to Manage it (CALM) is the latest accredited programme to be offered in the West Mercia Area.

The programme has been accredited by the National Prisons and Probation Accreditation Panel as an effective intervention.

Anger, in itself, is a normal emotion. However, it can become problematic when it results in a loss of control. This can, in turn, manifest itself in aggressive, intimidatory and/or violent behaviour. CALM provides a highly structured programme of work designed to help men manage their anger more effectively. This, in turn, will help to reduce the likelihood of loss of emotional control and therefore levels of aggressive violence.

It is designed for offenders who have committed a criminal offence of reactional violence specifically as a result of anger. Typical offences might include offences against a person, public order and criminal damage.

Specifically the programme trains offenders to monitor and control anger arousal, to examine and correct thinking errors behind emotion based aggression, to resolve conflicts and to increase self control.

The programme consists of 24 sessions each over two hours duration. In addition there are sessions at the beginning and end of the programme which form part of the evaluation process. The sessions are delivered by trained tutors twice weekly and usually in the evening.



The New Board Chair

James Kelly (pictured right), from West Malvern, is the new West Mercia Probation Board Chair. Following early retirement in September 2006, James took up post in April 2007. His background is in local government and the voluntary sector. He has previously specialised in community safety issues and led a number of high profile innovations which have been national successes. He is an expert in governance and performance review.

James has been joined by nine new Board Members who have been selected to reflect the community they will be serving. The new members who come from a wide range of backgrounds and experience in the business, public and voluntary sectors, are; Keith Austin, Peter Davidson, Keith Franklin, Elaine Hickman, Judge Alistair McCreath, Derek Muhl, Leon Murray, Bridget Nisbet and Andrew Strong.

Ministry of Justice

The new Ministry of Justice was launched on 9 May 2007 and is headed up by Jack Straw, the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. The new department is responsible for courts, prisons, probation and constitutional affairs and will focus on improving the justice system.

Jack Straw was appointed on 28 June 2007, following a brief stint by Lord Falconer who helped create the service. Jack has previously served as leader of the House of Commons, Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Home Secretary.

Jack Straw said, "The Ministry of Justice is a hugely important department: right at the heart of what Gordon Brown's Government is trying to achieve. Our mission as a new department is to improve public service and make experiences in all the fields in which we operate better for the public".

The key themes of the Ministry of Justice are, protecting the public, reducing re-offending and sense in sentencing. By bringing together courts, prisons and probation services the Ministry of Justice will offer a coherent system which will look at the whole life of an offender from conviction to punishment to rehabilitation.

Improvements will be measured in a number of ways – fewer offenders re-offending; public confidence that the punishment fits the crime; connection to the communities it serves; victims feeling the system looks after them and confidence in the way justice operates.



Newly Qualified Probation Officers

Thirteen newly qualified probation officers have been taken on by West Mercia Probation Area.

A presentation evening was held to present diplomas to the new officers. David Chantler, Chief Officer and James Kelly, Chair of the West Mercia Probation Board, made the presentations.

James Kelly, Chair of West Mercia Probation Board said, "Probation officers have a crucial front line role ensuring that community sentences are rigorously enforced and provide an effective alternative to custodial sentences. The Board recognises the time and dedication that these individuals have put into achieving this qualification".

David Chantler, Chief Officer, said, "The work of probation officers is challenging and they must feel confident in dealing with some of the most difficult people in society, but the opportunity to change and improve lives is a very powerful reward".



Pictured above: James Kelly, Board Chair and David Chantler, Chief Officer with some of the newly qualified Probation Officers.

The new officers had to undertake two years of training to qualify. Part of this is 'hands-on' practical work in the workplace under the guidance of experienced probation officers and the remainder is distance learning. This leads to a Diploma in Probation Studies, a recognised professional qualification made up of a BA (HONS) degree in Community Justice and an NVQ in Community Justice at Level Four.

Carole Celebrates 40 Years at Braley House

This year marks the 40th birthday of Braley House in Worcester. One member of Braley House staff, Carole Crouch, has worked there since it opened.

Braley House, now a probation approved premises housing bailies and offenders on licence, began its life in 1967 as a hostel for women owned by the Committee for Social Aid. Hereford & Worcester Probation took over management of the hostel in 1981 and since 2001 it has been run by West Mercia Probation. This year it changed from a mixed hostel to become an all male hostel.

Carole started on 10 July 1967 on a salary of £635 per annum and transferred to work for Probation when it took over in 1981.

She has seen many changes over the years; she recalls when the hostel staff lived on the premises and had to cook for all the residents and before the house was converted, residents had to share dormitories.

She said "One of the reasons I have stayed working here for so long is that it has not felt like working at the same place with all the changes I have seen during my forty years here".



Pictured above: Carole celebrates forty years at Braley House.