

Community Payback

Offenders in West Mercia carry out over 130,000 hours of compulsory unpaid work each year. Here are two examples of recent unpaid work projects.....

Offenders construct community garden

Offenders undertaking unpaid work have built a new garden for Warndon Community Centre, Worcester. Offenders worked most Saturdays for over four months to construct the garden from scratch. Work included flattening the area, laying paving and paths and constructing raised planting beds.

The idea for the garden came from Community Worker, Alan Poyner, who wanted to see the land surrounding the centre used in a purposeful way. He says it also links in with a health project the centre is currently running which encourages people to grow their own vegetables and eat more healthily. Alan is delighted with the professional job offenders have carried out, he said, "Without them this project wouldn't have happened. What little bit of money

we had we used to cover the materials and would never have been able to afford the labour costs. The lads were very committed and hard working and I hope they found it rewarding. Some of them are from Warndon so they are really putting something back into the community they live in".

Doug Rushton, Probation Supervisor said, "This was an excellent project; we had a really good group that worked hard throughout. We were lucky to have some very skilled offenders on the project that knew about building and carpentry and those that were un-skilled learnt from them.

The garden has an extensive paved area and paths leading to raised beds to accommodate wheelchairs. Both flowers and vegetables are planted in the beds. Any produce will be used for lunch clubs and children's activities at the centre.



Pictured above: Front centre Chris and Craig, pictured with centre staff and users and probation staff
Photo by John Anyon

Offenders maintain green areas

Offenders are being given the chance to make a difference in their community thanks to a two year project which has been launched in Worcestershire.

West Mercia Probation Trust and Worcestershire County Council's Countryside Service are joining forces to provide unpaid work opportunities for offenders. Offenders will be carrying out supervised work on public rights of way and countryside sites and will be asked to clear paths, trim hedges, paint benches and fences and look after signage.

Worcester County Council's cabinet member for the environment, Councillor Derek Prodger, said, "This is a great example of partnership working and will allow offenders to make a difference in their community".

Dan Barnett, Worcestershire County Council's Countryside Officer, said, "The Countryside Service can provide plenty of projects that will benefit the community, but for which no funding currently exists. This is a win-win situation for everyone involved".

Sara Atkins, Unpaid Work Manager for West Mercia Probation Trust said, "The project would provide interesting and challenging work for the offenders. As well as making reparation to the community, they will have the opportunity to acquire new skills which could lead to improved employment opportunities".



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proactive

News from West Mercia Probation Trust

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Offenders Receive Royal Visit

A group of offenders met the Princess Royal when she visited the Good Soil Project, based at Top Barn, just outside Worcester.

The project has been running for nearly two years and is proving a success. It is based on a 'back to the land' project launched in 2005 by West Mercia Probation and local TV gardening presenter, Monty Don. It is aimed at drug using offenders whose habits have led them to persistently offend.

Offenders can spend up to five days a week at the project where they are taught how to grow their own produce and work off the land. This provides them with a real opportunity to break their cycle of drug abuse and offending. The healthy daily structure and meaningful work the project offers helps to improve their health, increase their confidence and teach them new skills which can help them get a job when they leave.

Project Co-ordinator, Rocky Hudson, introduced the Princess to the offenders and showed her round the site which includes a carpentry workshop, kitchen and eating area, pigs, sheep, chickens, vegetable plot and poly tunnels. Shawn Grooms, who has just finished on the project, presented her with an owl box he had made in the workshop. Elaine Pritchard, who cooks daily for the group, chatted to the Princess and gave her a mug of coffee and a slice of home-made fruit cake. Before leaving the Princess planted a black pear tree to commemorate her visit.

Rocky has worked alongside the offenders and volunteers to transform the six acre plot from scratch to a productive enterprise. He welcomed the Royal visit, "The visit is recognition for the good work our clients are doing and will also help us to attract sponsorship because we are short of equipment and funding".

David Chantler, Chief Executive of West Mercia Probation Trust, is keen to encourage more projects of this sort, he said, "Probation remains responsible for managing community orders but we are increasingly looking for community based projects in which people can get real experiences and develop their skills in ways which are relevant".

"Projects such as this ensure that offenders are supervised for long periods of time in constructive activities. We select offenders for whom lengthy periods of supervision away from the temptations of crime are particularly relevant, for example the serial shoplifter, stealing to fund a drug habit."

The project is jointly funded by West Mercia Probation and Police and the land is given on a peppercorn rent by landowners David and Di Harper. The equipment was initially bought by West Mercia Care Trust, a charitable organisation that works with probation.

Pictured above: Rocky Hudson, Project Co-ordinator, the Princess Royal and an offender



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 1907, or jackie.bell@west-mercia.probation.gsi.gov.uk

The Good Soil Project



Pictured above: Offenders at the Good Soil Project with Rocky Hudson

The Good Soil Project provides places for up to 10 drug using offenders at any one time. Offenders spend up to five days a week at the project. Since it began, over 60 offenders have taken part. Two offenders, on the project, talk about their experiences.

Elaine

Elaine, 35 from Malvern, has been with the project 17 months and says it has been a life saver for her. She was using heroin and crack cocaine and her weight had plummeted to about six and a half stone when she joined. She said, "I was a mess; if I hadn't come here I seriously believe I would have been dead or in prison".

She had become isolated from her family and says she was existing rather than living. She said, "You lose your family, you lose everything and it just causes heartache. Before I came here I would beg, borrow, steal and do whatever I could to get my drugs. Coming here gets you away from that and your mind is focused

on something else, it really works".

Elaine soon developed an interest in cooking and she now cooks healthy meals for the group each day using fresh produce grown on the land. She said, "I really enjoy it, I never ate, let alone cooked, before I came here".

Elaine first used cannabis at the age of 11 and by 24 she was using crack and heroin but now she has been clean for several months and her physical health has improved dramatically.

Paul

Paul, 27 from Worcester, has been on the project for a few months. He was using four bags a day when he first joined. He

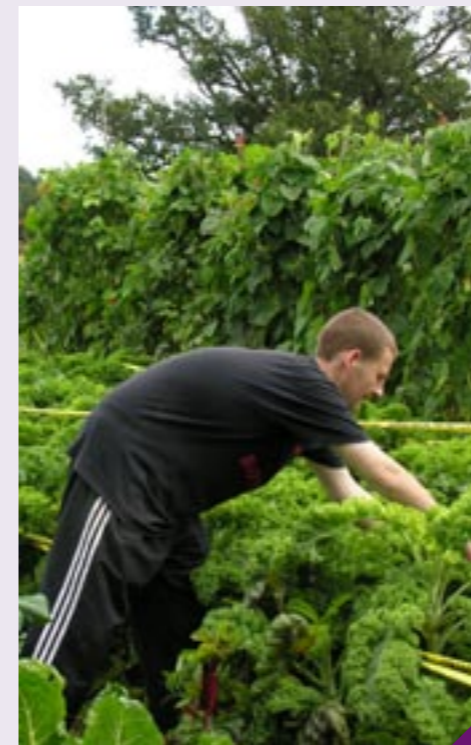
said, "The simple reason I am here is because I want to get clean off drugs. Being here has taken me out of the environment I was in – I was stuck in the cycle of drug use and offending".

Paul was on the original Monty Don project but had to finish after being sent to prison for drug offences. "When I came out I asked to come on this again and hopefully this time it will work for me. I really am determined. I have been on heroin for 11 years and I know it has just all got to come to a stop at some point".

When he finishes the project he is aiming to go to college and become a professional painter and decorator.



Pictured above: Paul feeding the pigs



Pictured above: Mark tending the vegetables

Supporting Compliance Initiative

In 2008 the Government made an additional £40 million available to the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) to help further develop confidence in community sentences.

The aim was to reduce the use of very short prison sentences and to replace them with community supervision in which courts could have confidence. West Mercia received £650,000 of this investment and used it to develop a project to support the compliance of offenders on community orders.

The project is being piloted in Worcestershire. It forms part of a range of alternative to custody measures being trialled within West Mercia to promote compliance with community penalties and thus reduce numbers into custody.

It will offer courts in Worcestershire a supportive option for those offenders who have an established history of non-compliance and whose breach of a community order or suspended sentence order with supervision puts them at risk of a short-term prison sentence.

West Mercia Probation Trust has contracted with Youth Support Services (YSS) to provide an intensive support service for appropriate offenders, via a specified activity requirement. YSS have considerable experience in working with some of the most difficult offenders through ACCLAIM (a persistent and priority offender scheme) and

our new joint venture with them builds upon the lessons drawn from this.

The supporting compliance initiative has been developed to identify and address barriers to attendance and engagement. A dedicated team of YSS and probation staff will deliver a specified programme of challenging, motivational, practical and solution focused support via supervision and daily telephone contact.

A supportive option for offenders who have an established history of non-compliance

Under the terms of a specified activity requirement, the offender will be required to attend a minimum of six one-hour appointments over a six week period with the YSS Supporting Compliance Officer, in addition to any other reporting requirements of their community order. Additional daily telephone contact and communication will focus on developing and improving motivation, consistently challenging attitudes and managing barriers to attendance. Where appropriate, community-based and home visits may be scheduled. On completion of the specified activity, the case will be reviewed and further support and contact via a trained YSS mentor may then form part of on-going supervision.

Offender Managers will outline this disposal to the breach court in the breach report where an offender has been assessed as eligible, and provide appropriate wording for the imposition of the specified activity. This initiative will be rolled out across West Mercia early in 2009.

04 Inside Justice Week



Pictured above: Frank Gravenor, Probation Officer and Magistrate, Graham Jones chat with students. Photo by Roy Booker

Inside Justice Week takes place every year and it gives people the opportunity to look behind the scenes of the Criminal Justice Service. All agencies are involved including Probation, Police, the Prison Service, Youth Offending Service, Courts and the Crown Prosecution Service.

This year West Mercia's Inside Justice Week took place in October and sentencing was the theme of a number of events held around the area.

Back to school for ex-offender

Students at King Charles School, Kidderminster, had a chance to meet with former drug addict and ex-offender, Mark Johnson, who spoke to them about the consequences of crime. Mark, an ex pupil from the school, has transformed his life of drugs and crime and now advises Government. He also advises the Board at West Mercia Probation Trust, where he gives an offender's perspective on policy making decisions. The students are currently reading his book 'Wasted' about his former life.

'Judge for Yourself'

Criminal justice agencies took part in an awareness day held at King Charles School, Kidderminster. Probation ran an interactive session using a CD Rom called 'Judge for Yourself' which follows the sentencing of four real life offenders. The students were given the opportunity to decide what they thought the sentence should be for the offenders. They were then told the actual decision of the Judge and after that, fast forwarded to the future to see how things turned out for the offender.

Students pass sentence

Students at Worcester Sixth Form College were given the chance to act as Magistrates and pass sentence on real life cases. A probation officer and a magistrate presented several 'cusp' cases to the students, where the offence was serious enough to warrant a prison sentence. The students voiced their opinions about what should happen to the offender before being taken through the case in detail and given the options available. They were then asked to pass sentence once they had all the information.

05 Chiefs Carry Out Unpaid Work

As part of Inside Justice Week, the Chiefs of CPS, Police and Courts Services all donned their casual gear and joined offenders to experience what it is like to do unpaid work.

Colin Chapman's experience

West Mercia's Chief Crown Prosecutor, Colin Chapman joined offenders at Worcester Countryside Centre where he got stuck into digging flower beds ready for planting. He said he was keen to work alongside some real offenders to see if this was the 'easy ride' that the public seem to think.

He said, "If the public's idea of getting up early, going out on a cold, wet, miserable morning, and doing physical work that you don't want to do is an easy ride, then the public have a point. That wasn't the reality. This wasn't fun by any stretch of the imagination and I ended my few hours of unpaid work reinforcing my view that prison isn't always the best option and that community penalties do work".

"I worked with a tremendous group of guys. Yes, they were all criminals who wronged their victims, and society, and were rightly working to make amends. However, they all knew this, accepted it, and knew that they were putting something back into the community at the same time. Moreover, they were all taking the opportunity to reflect on what they had done, how they would work to make sure it did not happen again and build their lives in a crime free way. I am sure that had they been given short prison sentences, which was the alternative option for all of them, their attitude would have been entirely different and less positive".

Chief Constable, Paul West's experience

The Chief Constable of West Mercia Constabulary, Paul West, joined offenders on community sentences to clean up at St George's Park, Kidderminster. Chief Constable West helped the group of seven offenders with picking up litter, sweeping paths and painting railings. The project is operated as a partnership between probation and Wyre Forest District Council.

Chief Constable West described his experience as a unique opportunity to see things from a very different perspective and indicated that his conversations with the offenders had been thought provoking and had given him plenty to reflect upon.

He said, "A community sentence provides a meaningful alternative to a prison sentence and doesn't punish an offender's innocent family in the same way as a prison sentence does. It also provides an opportunity to rehabilitate people in their own community at the same time as getting them to put something back into society. I wouldn't say that it's ideal for all situations, but for those less serious offenders with family and caring responsibilities it has to be more beneficial all round than making someone sit in a cell in an overcrowded prison day after day".



Pictured above: Chief Prosecutor, Colin Chapman, prepares a flower bed with an offender

Peter Hammersley's experience

Her Majesty's Courts Services Area Director for West Mercia, the Black Country and Staffordshire, Peter Hammersley, joined a Telford work party of offenders who were painting and decorating for a charity called CARE. CARE provides support services for adults with learning disabilities and the work party was refurbishing a house in Ironbridge that is home to thirteen residents.

Mr Hammersley said, "It was a real opportunity to see for myself how it all works, rather than being told. I am very impressed with the way that these projects are carried out by probation, the beneficiaries and how much the unpaid work party contributes. On this particular work party I got a real sense of commitment, but I also realised very early on that this isn't an easy option, rather one requiring time and commitment that impacts on people's lives. This was reflected heavily when speaking to each participant about their individual circumstances."

06 Delivering Minister's Offender Compacts

Minister of Prisons and Probation, David Hanson, visited West Mercia Probation's Telford office to meet with offenders who have signed up to the new 'offender compacts'.

In the summer of 2008 the Minister announced his intention that offenders should have an individual agreement with the Probation Service. These 'compacts' emphasise the need for offenders to accept the responsibilities of their sentence and details what they can expect from probation. Any advantages offenders receive must be earned through commitment, hard work and delivery against the aims of their sentence plans.

West Mercia Probation Trust was selected to run pilot schemes to deliver the Minister's vision in Shrewsbury and Telford for six months with a view to the scheme being rolled out nationally in 2009.

Visiting one of the pilot sites David Hanson said, *"These new proposals will not only require offenders to demonstrate basic compliance, as is currently the case, but will now call on them to show commitment beyond this. Offenders need to know that as well as being given the opportunity of rehabilitation they also have responsibilities which they must meet."*

David Chantler, Chief Executive of West Mercia Probation Trust, welcomed the clarity and transparency of the compacts. He said, *"This is a valuable initiative which leaves offenders in no doubt as to what is required of them. It will help improve offenders' compliance with their orders and thereby avoiding a return to court and eventually custody. It is a win-win situation"*.

Braley House Garden Transformed

Residents at Braley House, Approved Premises in Worcester, have totally transformed the garden. Previously an uninspiring slabbed and lawned area, the garden now boasts a pond and water feature, a seating area, bird table, garden lights and has been planted with trees, shrubs and potted plants.

This was all thanks to the kind donations made by staff and local businesses and to the hard work of the residents and staff involved. Not only do the residents have a pleasant outside space to enjoy but the offenders that took part in the project achieved units towards a gardening qualification.



Pictured above: The Minister meets offenders and staff

Telford Area Manager, George Branch, agreed compacts were a useful tool to engage with offenders and get them to comply with their orders. He also welcomed the benefits it would give offenders, *"It makes sense for the offender to agree to sign up to the compact. They will benefit from training, which can lead to them achieving an NVQ and they will receive guidance to help them get back into employment"*.

The compact will be referred to throughout the offender's period of supervision either to emphasise the need for improvements in behaviour or to acknowledge personal achievement during the sentence. If the rules of the compact are at any time broken/flouted, offenders could face the possibility of penalties or being taken off their programme of training.



Chief's Column

With this edition of ProActive we can look back at the first six months of operating as a Probation Trust; West Mercia is one of the six first wave trusts. Part of being in the first wave has been to explore the "freedoms" to operate in new ways and the past six months have been fascinating in understanding what it is to operate as a provider trust, but still within the overall context of the NOMS Agency, which came into being just as the Trust was launched. What being a Trust has, undeniably, brought to West Mercia is a real sense of taking responsibility for our own future, particularly in relation to resource planning. We now have a three year resource and financial plan, the creation of which has only been possible with the freedom from traditional mindsets that Trust status has brought. With the financial and economic crisis that has engulfed the world during this period, the timing in developing this self confidence in our planning could not have been better.

Meanwhile it seems that the world has been beating a track to our door, from the Royal visit to the Good Soil Project, to a delegation of Croatian Judges and officials from the Ministry of Justice, to our own Minister, David Hanson; everyone seems to want to see how we do it. An interesting aspect of the Croatian visit was when we showed them part of the Monty Don series "Growing out of Trouble", to illustrate, in what we thought was an original and interesting way, the work we were doing in relation to the rural economy, only to be told that they'd already seen the series in Croatia on BBC World. I would give a lot to hear how I come across dubbed into Serbo-Croat! Having made a grant to Care Farming West Midlands to help establish the network of farmers wanting to work with offenders and other groups, we are hopeful that the Network will attract significant additional funding in 2009 to move this initiative onto the next level.

Having explored our rural economy in the Care Farming initiatives the next aspect

of our West Mercian experience that we wish to develop is around the roots of the modern Olympic games in Much Wenlock. Originated by a local magistrate in the early nineteenth century, Dr William Penny Brookes, the games were originally designed to provide constructive and healthy alternatives for the local hooligans who came before him on the bench. With the coming of the railways, competitions were organised with other towns in the West Midlands. When, later in the century, Baron Coubertan founded the modern Olympics, he never failed to acknowledge the role of Penny Brookes and the Much Wenlock games in inspiring him. The London 2012 economic assessment references the role and importance of Shropshire in the build up to the games and we are already working with Telford and Shropshire Councils to develop sports pathways for local offenders, making the Olympic heritage work for us and honouring Dr Penny Brookes, memory in the most fitting way by continuing his work with offenders.

As you will have read elsewhere in ProActive, David Hanson visited us to see, first hand, how the work on the offender compacts that he has championed, and that we are piloting in West Mercia, was going. We were glad that he was pleased with progress, but more than this the visit demonstrated the value of the networks that form the core of our work - links between offending and sport, farming and the rural economy, into employment issues, international links with other jurisdictions and links across the sectors of society. As a result of her visit, the Princess Royal commissioned a chicken house from the Good Soil Project, so there is even a bit of the Royal residence that is forever West Mercia.

David Chantler
Chief Executive

07 Engaging With Employers

West Mercia Probation Trust and Midlands Excellence jointly convened an event about offender employment at HMP Hewell in November. It built on West Mercia's extensive experience in developing employment pathways for offenders, based on research that shows that having a job is the single most important factor in reducing re-offending.

Local organisations were invited along to hear about the experience of employers that currently work with probation. Nationwide Autocentres, Inter-Continental Hotels Group and Artisan Design all spoke of the positive experience they had had in working with offenders. The hotel group made the point that offenders were twice as likely to remain with them than those staff recruited through their normal processes. National Autocentres described how difficult it was to recruit people who could jump into any make of car and transport it from one site to another. David Chantler, West Mercia Probation Chief Executive, caused some merriment in the audience when he stated that many offenders on probation dream of having such an opportunity and this was a really good example of where employer and employee were mutually satisfying each other's needs.

Croatian Visitors

West Mercia hosted a visit from a group of Croatian Judges, prosecutors and prison service officials. Plans are afoot to create a probation service in Croatia and the visitors came to West Mercia to see how it is done. The visitors spent a week looking at various aspects of our work. They admitted to being daunted at the prospect of visiting England but had been pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome they had received and declared the visit well worthwhile.