

**Notes from an Open Meeting of the Wolverhampton Over 50's Forum  
held on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2003 with Mr. Steven Gill Assistant Chief Officer,  
West Midlands Probation Service.**

Brad Purshouse, Chairman of the Wolverhampton Over 50's Forum opened the meeting by introducing Steven Gill.

Steven explained he was the Assistant Chief Officer of West Midlands Probation Service with specific responsibility for Community Punishment Orders.

Since April 2001 the Probation Service became a national organisation, with a national directorate and an aim to bring consistency across the country.

The objectives of the Probation Service are to provide punishment, rehabilitation and public protection. In relation to punishment the Community Punishment Orders are to replace the Community Service Orders which have been used for the last 25 years in Wolverhampton. The idea of this type of order is to enable the offender to pay something back to the community where the offence was committed. It is designed specifically for the offender to have to give up their free time to undertake work that will be of benefit to the community offended against.

The legal structure of Community Punishment Orders is they can be given to convicted offenders aged sixteen and above and who have been convicted of a prisonable offence. The length of the Order varies from 40 hours – 240 hours and must be completed within 12 months from being set.

Steven went on to outline the type of offences that can lead to community punishment orders:

Types of offences that can lead to Community Punishment orders are:

- Theft / fraud/ property theft – all of which is of a less serious nature. For example handling stolen goods.
- Violent crimes and antisocial behaviour, criminal damage and assault charges
- Vehicle crime – e.g. driving whilst disqualified.

Steven then gave some facts and figures about Community Punishment Orders:-

- Out of 4,500 Community Punishment Orders made in the West Midlands 588 were made in Wolverhampton. Of this number only 10% were made to 16/17 year olds. 85-90% of them were Male.

Therefore it can be seen that the typical profile of offender who receives this sentence is a male aged between 18-25 years old.

When an Order has been made the Probation Service have to assess the suitability of the offender for different opportunities available to service their sentence. They identify what supervision they will require, how trustworthy are they, what they can do, and when can they do it.

Upon completion Assessments are given Health and Safety training to ensure safety standards are met. Offenders are required to do at least 5 hours a week. Attendance is monitored and any failure to attend results in the offender returning to Court. They will be fined and either have additional hours added or the offender can be re-sentenced.

**Steven went on to tell us about the types of work offenders carry out on Community Punishment Orders in Wolverhampton.**

In partnership with the police leaflets regarding community safety have been distributed in the All Saints/Bilston areas.

In the Whitmore Reans area, in partnership with police and neighbourhood wardens and Featherstone prison, prisoners have made metal gates and Offenders on Orders have fitted them in the areas where most crime occurs in order to make the area safer.

Offenders have worked with British Waterways cleaning up the canal areas; positive feedback has been received from them describing how this work has enabled local communities to use the areas as a recreation facility.

Offenders have worked with the local authority with clean-up operations.

Some offenders are placed in charity shops if they are trustworthy.

Those who cannot be trusted work under supervision in a workshop which does carpentry and items are made for distribution around the City to various organisations within Local communities.

To show how this is operating here in Wolverhampton Steven quoted some figures: in the last 6 months 165 thousand hours have been served in Wolverhampton.

Steven explained the work has to be of a demanding nature of necessity but the punishment element comes from the fact that the person has to give up their time to complete the work.

When deciding what tasks can be carried out the Probation Service has to be sure they are not doing work that should be completed by paid employees thus taking work away from people.

The Probation Service also tries to be a stepping stone to employment or education for some offenders but the Service can only suggest not enforce these elements.

**Steven then invited questions from the audience:**

**Q** How does supervision work, is it in groups or on a one to one basis?

**A** Each supervisor has about 4-6 offenders to supervise in their groups. Some organisations take individual low risk offenders on placement and they then provide the supervision for the offender and report any problems back to the probation service.

**Q** I have read criticisms of giving demeaning jobs to offenders?

**A** The principle of the tasks is that it must benefit the Community and must not take away paid work.

**Q** What rights do victims of crime have to see if a Community Punishment Order has been served?

**A** The police have a responsibility to keep victims informed, the only responsibility the Probation Service have is to keep victims of serious violent or sexual crimes informed of a offenders sentence served. Any requests for information should go in writing to the Probation Service for consideration.

***The point was made that victims should be kept informed, they deserve to know how the sentence has been carried out.***

**Q** Who can request work to be done by the Probation Service and how do you request it?

**A** Anyone can request work to be done direct to the Probation Service. If it meets the criteria i.e. of not being paid work taken from people and it is a benefit to the community it will be considered.

For example, if a church requires re-decorating it is a job that can be done by Offenders providing the church supplies the materials. The labour can be supplied via the Probation Service.

A job which cannot be done is street litter clearing as it is a council employee task. A Health and Safety assessment must be carried out before agreeing to do work.

**Q** Do the probation service accept responsibility for the behaviour of the offenders?

**A** Yes, they ensure acceptable standards of work and conduct whilst working.

**Q** Can they work alongside council employees to do tasks like litter clearing?

**A** Some Councils do work in partnership with organisations, here in Wolverhampton they do an annual street clean up and remove rubbish that would otherwise be 'fly tipped'.

**Q** What percentage of people complete their Orders and how many re-offend?

**A** National figures show 68% of Orders are completed and of those not completed there are two reasons for this

- 1) Failure to comply, which in turn results in going back to Court and
- 2) Committed a further offence.

**Q** Have you got any local figures?

**A** Only national figures are available

**Q** Community Punishment Orders are for 16yrs up, what do you do with the under 16yrs?

**A** The Youth Offending Teams that were set up in the last 2/3 years are responsible for the under sixteen's, they are made up of a multi-disciplinary team including police, social workers, probation service, local authority, education, health etc. They look at ways of working with young Offenders and maybe it would be helpful to talk to them direct.

**Q** Can Offenders be made to do direct work with victims?

**A** Yes, experiments have been done with this but you have to see how

appropriate this would be. Victims could be placed at further risk and often the Offenders take weeks to get to Court so you can't wait for the system to make it part of the Order e.g. to repair the property an Offender broke .

**Q** Who appoints you to your posts, who are your bosses, as it seems to me this is just bureaucracy at work?

**A** The West Midlands Probation Board employ us to our posts and they are appointed direct by the Home Secretary.

**Q** Do you keep records as we have seen no publicity?

**Marlene stated we were welcome to talk to beneficiaries of the Probation Service Work put this at the bottom and we could do with her contact details going with it.**

**A** Yes, some items go in the press such as the work on the canals

**Q** When the hours are completed by Offenders what happens then?

**A** When the hours have been completed that is the end of the Order, there is no legal requirement to do anything else. However, we do try to signpost people in to education or employment to improve basic skills or gain qualifications. The Courts can apply a Rehabilitation Order to Offenders which can state they have to complete a course or something similar to complete their sentence.

There is currently a White Paper/Bill which proposes some changes that will mean the Courts have greater flexibility to give sentences This could include Community Punishment hours, 12 months Rehabilitation Order, attendance at a programme for removing the problems which caused them to offend i.e. Drug Rehabilitation and even impose a Curfew.

**Q** Is the probation service being over-loaded by Courts not giving custodial sentences?

**A** The recent guidance has not been felt yet by the West Midlands Division.

**Q** Can you for see your department becoming overloaded in the future?

**A** The potential is there for an increase in work. The figures for Wolverhampton are slightly down, but nationally they are up.

**Q** Is there a procedure in place if Offenders disappear before finishing their Orders?

- A** Yes, anyone on an Order has a requirement to notify a change of address.
- Q** There is a lack of publicity on what Offenders do on Community Punishment Orders. Could they not be more easily identifiable so that the public can see what is being done?
- A** It is important to ensure Communities are informed of the good done by Offenders serving Orders.
- Q** Would it be possible for an Annual Statement to be issued saying what had been achieved in the Community through the work carried out by Offenders?
- A** This is a good suggestion and Steven Gill promised to look at incorporating a statement into the Annual Report.
- Q** The public seems to be ignorant of the facts about the Probation Service should you not publicise the work?
- A** Yes and the press are used in some examples, maybe this needs to be increased.
- Q** Could the Offenders not work in conjunction with the Council to pick litter up?
- A** This would have to be discussed with Unions about the issue of taking away paid employment opportunities. The issue of cleanliness in the environment is one that is tackled by using the Probation Service. Mr Gill promised to take away suggestions such as this and give it further thought and perhaps talk with the Local Authority to see what can be done.
- The point was made that there was enough rubbish to go around for Council employees and the Offenders for cleaning up.
- Mr Gill said sometimes there were more jobs for the Offenders to do than there were Offenders. However, it was not being suggested that the number of Offenders should increase to allow jobs to be done.
- Q** Many older people have problems with gardening tasks, can Offenders not assist with this?

**A** Their suitability would need to be assessed to be sure the beneficiaries of the service were not being placed at risk. We would need to be sure the work can be suitably managed and supervised.

**Q.** Can church yards be cleared up?

**A** Yes, some churches already receive a maintenance service from Probation Service Offenders teams.

After further discussion on the issues raised today the meeting was drawn to a close. The Chairman thanked Steven Gill and Marlene Tomkys for attending. Marlene agreed to come along to future meetings to open discussions between the Probation Service and Wolverhampton Over 50's.