

Rethinking Crime and Punishment 2

Rob Allen describes the next phase of work to increase confidence in community penalties.

With the prison population in England and Wales approaching 80,000, the case for effective and widely supported alternatives is greater than ever. Just before Christmas a major new initiative was launched aimed at boosting the confidence of judges, magistrates and the general public in community based penalties for offenders. 'Rethinking Crime and Punishment Phase Two' (RCP2) aims to put into practice the recommendations from the largest investigation into crime ever undertaken by a British charity – the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation in 2001 to raise the level of debate about the use of prison in the UK.

Chief among the findings from the 60 original RCP projects (which included the major independent inquiry into alternatives to prison chaired by Scottish judge Lord Coulsfield) was the need to raise awareness of and involvement in the delivery of community sentences such as

different approaches in High Wycombe, Bicester, Milton Keynes and Slough. The work builds on the successful Edenham Park project in Reading where offenders in prison and on community sentences worked to renovate a rundown park and play area in cooperation with local residents.

Thames Valley Partnership will also be giving magistrates and judges the opportunity to visit a range of community sentence projects and to discuss them with the probation service and other providers. A series of structured visits will take place to stimulate discussion about the key themes of community sentencing – public protection, treatment programmes and reparation through unpaid work. The judges' visits are already underway and proving valuable.

Alongside this local work, RCP 2 is also contributing to an awards scheme to recognise the country's top ten projects which prevent future offending by involving victims and local people. RCP2 is helping to fund the second year of

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unpaid work and community reparation. While RCP found considerable scepticism about the value of prison as a response to crime, both sentencers and the general public remain largely unconvinced by community alternatives. Giving ordinary people a greater role in determining the content of such penalties, and ensuring judges and magistrates know what these penalties actually entail, is one way of raising confidence in their use as alternatives to short prison sentences. The aim of RCP2 is to identify how this might be achieved.

The project comprises a focused programme of practical work in one region of the country, the Thames Valley, plus an effort to identify and disseminate what works best through an annual awards scheme.

The practical work will be carried by the Thames Valley Partnership, a charity who have done ground breaking work to create safer and stronger communities in the region for more than ten years. They will be testing ways of involving ordinary members of the community in deciding what forms of unpaid community work they would like offenders to do. Research for RCP found that two thirds of the public would be interested in having this kind of say, with a higher proportion in the case of victims of crime. Yet few mechanisms exist for people to suggest to the probation service what they would like to see done. The project will test

the scheme, run by the Howard League for Penal Reform, and to disseminate best practice from the projects, which won awards this year. The initiative as a whole will be overseen by the International Centre for Prison Studies at King's College London, whose director led the first phase of RCP.

The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation will be evaluating the impact of all three strands and working closely with ministers, the judiciary, NOMS and the voluntary sector to ensure the emerging lessons are widely known. RCP2 fits closely with the government's desire to increase the visibility of community penalties. It is hoped it will identify sustainable ways to build support for prison alternatives not simply by promising greater punishment and tougher enforcement, but by enabling greater public participation in, and ownership of, the sentences imposed in their name.

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