

Communities engaging with community service: the 'Making Good' initiative

Debbie Clarke looks at the Thames Valley pilot programme.

The *Criminal Justice Act 1972* first saw the introduction of community service orders (CSOs), operational nationally by the mid 1970s. CSOs were introduced following the Wootton Report which recommended their introduction as an alternative to custody. A CSO required an offender to complete between 40 and 240 hours of unpaid work in the community. Over the past 30 years its delivery has become more structured and enforceable with National Standards being introduced in 1989, giving formalized procedures for non-compliance of an order. The latest changes came with the *Criminal Justice Act 2003* where we saw the introduction of the Community Order with an unpaid work requirement, increasing the total number of hours an offender can be sentenced to 300. However the core nature of community service has not changed, an offender must complete a specified number of hours paying back to the community, the work must be challenging, and the punishment demanding. With the prison population continuing to rise we hear again from the Government that 'unpaid work', as community service is now known, must be more visible to communities and the number of hours ordered nationally is set to double by 2011 (Home Office 2006).

The offenders were aware that this was a community focused project and the community was aware that offenders sentenced to unpaid work were undertaking the work.

In 2001 The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation set up Rethinking Crime and Punishment (RCP), a four-year piece of research looking into the use of prison and other alternative sentences, funding over 50 separate projects nationally. The aim was to look again at the level of debate surrounding the ever growing prison population and alternative forms of punishment. One of the key findings was that unpaid work is not visible to the community and the public and courts have little confidence in it as a sentence (RCP, 2004). We already know that unpaid work has been around since the 1970s and yet the public is often not aware that offenders are performing unpaid work in their communities. What can be done to

engage communities and courts in its delivery and would doing so increase confidence?

In 2005 the Thames Valley Partnership received funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to undertake a three-year initiative looking at one of the RCP recommendations. 'RCP2 – Implementing the Findings', as it is known, has resulted in the 'Making Good – Communities Engaging with Community Service' programme. This is being piloted in four sites across the Thames Valley: Slough, Wycombe, Milton Keynes and Bicester. The programme seeks to work with communities to give the general public more say about what work is done by offenders sentenced to unpaid work. The aim of this is to see if engaging with communities increases confidence in the criminal justice system, and in particular unpaid work.

The pilot in Bicester will not only work with local communities but also explore extending the role of the Youth Referral Panels, currently used by the Youth Offending Team (YOT). In this area 'Making Good' will work closely with the YOT to delivery a more joined-up approach to reparation regardless of age and learn from the community-based approach of the referral panels in identifying local work for local offenders. A young person can receive up to 24 hours reparation and the guidelines for delivery are different to that of the probation service. A project currently being undertaken by the YOT is making slower progress than anticipated, so the Probation Service, through the Making Good project, is now working in partnership with the YOT to complete the project. In just three work sessions, the unpaid work team with up to six adult offenders has helped the project to progress and will continue to work with the YOT until completion.

Community engagement is high on the Government's agenda. Several initiatives are in place to encourage communities to have more say on issues that affect them. In November 2005 the Home Office launched the 'Community Payback' scheme. This aims to make the delivery of unpaid work more visible, asking probation services nationally to badge the work that offenders are completing. Roger Hill, Director for the National Probation Service for England and Wales, gave a speech at the launch of Community Payback on 22nd November 2005. He described community engagement as "at it's simplest we engage with local authorities through crime and disorder reduction partnerships."



'The Millies', improved by unpaid work, Making Good project.

Here we have a scheme that seeks to address the issues of visibility and community engagement, but is engagement with local authorities enough, can this be a sustainable model, and how does it compare to the Making Good project?

We also have the Neighbourhood Policing agenda. This allows the police, partner agencies and the community to set up Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAG) who meet to identify concerns in the community. At first glance this could be a vehicle for Making Good community engagement. Local people are invited to sit on a NAG following a public meeting and identify three community concerns. It could easily be the case that one or more of these concerns are areas of work for unpaid work through probation. The use of NAGs is being

explored in one ward within the pilot sites but the Making Good project aims to explore a variety of community engagement models as well as NAGs.

It was essential to the 'Making Good' initiative to understand the local authority structures, roles and responsibilities of staff and the role of elected members in the four pilot sites. The local authorities continue to be partners in the delivery of Making Good.

Making Good aims to involve local people in the choice of work done by offenders. We know that community service has been around for over 30 years so where do those projects come from? In Thames Valley projects are found in various ways

Continued on page 48

– links with local authorities, referrals from existing placement providers, web-site suggestions and ‘cold-calling’ charities and voluntary organisations, selling the idea of unpaid work. The public may have identified some projects but this is not measured and often the work identified is not suitable due to health and safety requirements and the national standards the probation service must meet.

Initial work with communities on the Making Good project has highlighted that many members of the general public do not know what unpaid work is. In various public meetings the only people who had heard of it were placement providers of unpaid work and a magistrate. This project aims to work with existing community engagement structures where possible, to develop sustainable models and create community panels who will work closely with the probation service. The panels will identify unpaid work of relevance to the local community, work closely with community organisations to support placements, inform the public about the work and provide some accountability to the community for work done by offenders. The panels will receive training so that they are best placed to inform the public and identify work.

Slough is the first of the pilot sites where a panel

existing community groups (or the lack of them) have been identified. Public meetings to introduce the project have been met with enthusiasm and concern. There are no shortcuts to engaging communities. It has taken six months of meetings to discover who the grassroots groups are and introduce the project. The types of work the public are identifying is to some extent no surprise and nothing new for unpaid work: removal of graffiti and litter, clearance of walkways, conservation. The Making Good project may continue to identify work that is the same as the current delivery of unpaid work, but it seeks to make the delivery look and feel different with established, sustainable links in place between communities and the probation service.

Not only has it been necessary to introduce the project to the public but also to the unpaid work teams in probation, who are very keen to engage with the public and complete work identified by them but do not have the mechanisms in place to achieve this, so this is where the Making Good project steps in.

The Making Good project is asking the unpaid work teams to rethink project delivery and the prioritising of work. The Community Payback scheme has refocused unpaid work with regards to the type of projects being undertaken and public awareness however the level of community engagement and sustainability are not embedded within the

The Making Good project may continue to identify work that is the same as the current delivery of unpaid work, but it seeks to make the delivery look and feel different with established, sustainable links in place between communities and the probation service.

has been identified. Training began in July. The panel was identified following attendance at several community groups which kept leading back to the Slough Federation of Tenants and Residents (‘The Fed’). The Fed has already identified one project that is underway by the unpaid work team through the Making Good project. An area of land known as ‘The Millies’, owned by the Wildlife Trust, was given to the local community to manage. The area suffered from a lot of anti-social behaviour, with groups setting random fires, dropping litter and hanging around in gangs making the area feel unsafe for use by local people. The wildlife had all but disappeared due to the number of fires and the community service team was tasked with transforming the area. The offenders collected litter and navigated water via channels from the river through to the marshland to encourage wildlife and discourage further fires. An open meeting was held and a voluntary group was formed to continue maintenance of the land. The offenders were aware that this was a community focused project and the community was aware that offenders sentenced to unpaid work were undertaking the work.

Through working with the local authorities,

Community Payback scheme. The Thames Valley Probation Area continue to be valued key supporters and partners in the delivery of this project.

Debbie Clarke is the Making Good Programme Manager for Thames Valley Partnership, seconded from Thames Valley Probation. Debbie’s role within the Probation Service is as one of the Quality Assurance Managers (Unit Manager) for Unpaid Work.

References

- Hill, R. (2005), www.probation.homeoffice.gov.uk/output/Page315.asp
Home Office (2006), *A Five Year Strategy for Protecting the Public and Reducing Re-offending*. London: The Stationery Office. www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/five-year-strategy
RCP (2004), *Rethinking Crime and Punishment – The Report*. London: Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. www.rethinking.org.uk