

BBC Radio 4 Today

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Community Payback – Alison Finch, Janet Neville, Sarah Billiald

James Naughtie, presenter: Every day, more than 200,000 offenders in England and Wales are under the supervision of the Probation Service, the majority of them on Community Orders. When supervision goes badly wrong, as it did tragically with one of the men convicted earlier this month of murdering two French students in London, it makes the headlines – naturally. But each day, probation officers have to deal with the more mundane and routine realities of probation work, and all of it has to be done within budgets that are shrinking. In the second of his series on probation, our home affairs correspondent, Danny Shaw, reports from Kent.

Danny Shaw, home affairs correspondent: The peaceful Saxon village of Hadlow in the Vale of Kent is not the place you would expect to see a group of offenders, but that's exactly where I find Hugh and Darren, outside Hadlow Parish Office at the Old School Hall in the village centre, wearing orange bibs, doing unpaid work on a Community Payback project. What are you doing here today?

Hugh, on Community Payback scheme: We're doing a bit of gardening. Moving some things from a churchyard, first of all, and then doing some flower beds. We've cut it all down and then just laid it with chippings and stuff like that.

Danny Shaw: And is it backbreaking work, or is it fairly easy?

Darren, on Community Payback scheme: Oh it's fairly easy, yes, it's just gardening. That's what we do basically every week, gardening or shifting rubbish – doing something.

Hugh: I find it hard work. I'm a bit of a geek and I don't do any manual labour, so I find it hard, but that's just because I'm not used to it.

Danny Shaw: Every day in Kent convicted offenders, supervised by probation staff, carry out more than 1,000 of unpaid work as part of their sentence. Unpaid community work is not a new concept, but it's more structured than it's ever been and more visible. Offenders working on public projects have to wear fluorescent jackets with a Community Payback logo. Alison Finch is Kent's Community Safety Officer.

Alison Finch, Community Safety Officer, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council: It's a good way to get people to pay back for what they've done wrong. The people that are chosen to do the Community Payback work will benefit from it, can

hopefully, sort of, learn some new skills through it as well, and if that prevents them going on to commit further crimes then I think it's worthwhile.

Danny Shaw: Unpaid community work is quietly emerging as a jewel in the Probation Service's crown. It's seen as a tough alternative to custody, popular with the public and beneficial to communities, but it only works if it's enforced properly. In Kent 30% of Payback schemes are not completed, and those who don't attend can find themselves at Medway Magistrates' Court in Chatham.

Kevin Carr, on Community Payback scheme: I am absolutely shocked. I don't... I can't even believe it.

Danny Shaw: Kevin Carr has just felt the full and unexpected force of the law for breaching his Community Payback Order. He thought magistrates would punish him by adding on more hours to the 250 he already has to complete, but they went further than he anticipated.

Kevin Carr: My probation officer recommended that I get an extra 10 to 20 hours added on. The judge decided not to do this and tagged me for three months from seven o'clock in the evening till six o'clock in the morning. I can't go down... I can't socialise and watch football and et cetera like that, you know. If I want to go down to my nan's for a night I can't go down and stay down there for a night now.

Janet Neville, Chairman, Magistrates' Bench: Kevin Carr had chosen to do overtime for his paid employer, rather than his unpaid work, and some people might think that's a reasonable choice. I'm afraid the bench doesn't.

Danny Shaw: Janet Neville is the Chairman of the Magistrates' Bench which imposed the curfew on Carr during a series of court hearings dealing with offenders who breach Community Orders. If an offender fails to turn up twice on a community programme they must be brought before the courts within 10 days. Janet Neville says the rules are far tougher than they used to be.

Janet Neville: We have found it very frustrating when someone is breached after they've not attended for two or three months. National guidelines the Probation Service work to has required them to breach defendants much more quickly, and that means that they can be dealt with, therefore, much more quickly.

Danny Shaw: But tougher enforcement means extra work for probation officers, who each have 40 or 50 cases on the go at any one time. At her office, Kent's Chief Probation Officer, Sarah Billiald, is working on plans to manage the workload with less money. The Probation Service is having to make substantial savings over the next three years, which unions claim could lead to 2,500 job losses. In Kent the probation budget is being cut by 13%. Sarah Billiald says that could jeopardise longer-term schemes to cut reoffending.

Sarah Billiald, Chief Officer, Kent Probation Area: The longer-term work to really change offenders' behaviour is the stuff that would be more at risk of being squeezed, and I think that would be a shame, because that has the longer-term impact on reducing reoffending and potentially reducing crime in the future.

Danny Shaw: Why do you think those are the areas where there may be the squeeze, on the longer-term projects?

Sarah Billiald: Because I don't think it's ever acceptable to put the public at risk, and that is... that's always going to be the priority. And whilst probation, and everyone in probation, believe passionately that changing offenders is the longer-term objective, the short-term objective around protecting the public will always take precedence.

Danny Shaw: Short-term wins out over long-term?

Sarah Billiald: Unfortunately, yes.

James Naughtie, presenter: Danny Shaw on probation.

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