

Tackling Graffiti in South County Dublin: The Community Service Response to a Community Problem

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Summary: Community Service is a sentencing alternative to custody under the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act 1983. It provides unpaid work by the offender of benefit to the community. The Probation Service, in seeking innovative ways for Community Service to add value to communities, has developed the Graffiti Removal Project. This article traces the evolution and development of this Project and evaluates the experience and learning to inform similar Community Service initiatives.

Keywords: Community Service, Courts, criminal justice, imprisonment, sanctions, offenders, alternatives to custody, graffiti, partnership, community, Probation Service.

Introduction

For many years graffiti has been a vexatious issue for urban communities across Ireland. Pervasive graffiti demoralises neighbourhoods. Local communities can feel powerless against this encroachment as the high costs of effective clean-up militate against a timely response. There is an ongoing need for graffiti removal work in communities across the country. This need presents an opportunity for Community Service to make a practical and valued contribution.

Community Service, a programme managed by the Probation Service, is a visible and effective form of direct recompense by offenders to communities and indirectly to victims for the harm and damage caused by their offending. A Community Service Order under the Criminal

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Justice (Community Service) Act 1983 provides for the performance of a specified number of hours of unpaid work (up to 240 hours) of a practical nature, of benefit to the community, in lieu of a custodial sentence.

The (Community Service) Act 1983 outlines a clear pathway for the implementation of such orders.

- At the request of the Court a Probation Officer assesses the offender's suitability to perform such work and task availability.
- The Court confirms the offender's consent before making a Community Service Order.
- The Probation Service is responsible for work placement arrangements and supervision to complete the Court Order.
- Should the offender not complete the required number of hours, the Probation Service returns the case to Court for judicial decision, which may result in the imposition of the original custodial sentence.

In 2008, 1,385 persons, nationally, were made subject to Community Service Orders, providing for a total of 210,326 hours of Community Service work for the benefit of communities.

Work carried out by offenders on Community Service Orders included maintenance, landscaping and restoration of community facilities such as public areas, graveyards and youth club premises, and other work with community groups.

Graffiti removal in Tallaght

Over many years the Tallaght Probation office in South County Dublin had an established working relationship with the local authority and local communities. As in other areas, the success of this work depended on local arrangements. With equipment that was sometimes hired, sometimes borrowed, the Community Service team had managed some small-scale graffiti removal, painting and site clearance projects as part of the programmes for offenders under supervision.

Despite limitations of scale and resources, this Community Service community clean-up work was well received by residents and local communities. It was recognised as a valuable resource, a real benefit to communities and neighbourhoods with reparation by offenders. It also provided a platform for the development of a new and expanded

Community Service graffiti removal project to address these unmet needs in communities.

In this way, the cornerstones were laid for the identification of graffiti removal as an important and strategic opportunity to

- develop Community Service work on a larger and better equipped scale
- deliver visible and real added value in and to communities.

This vision was initiated on a small scale in 2004–2005 and received particular endorsement and support in the Programme for Government in 2007.

The *Programme for Government 2007–2012* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2007) outlined a commitment to

build on the community service order regime by introducing a ... [s]cheme that will require offenders who are not subject to automatic long prison terms to provide real services for the communities they have damaged. These would include cleaning streets, painting over graffiti, repairing public facilities, etc.

The setting up of the Community Service Graffiti Removal Project in South Dublin

In late 2006 the Probation Service had proposed the development, on a pilot basis, of a dedicated Graffiti Removal Service project working in partnership with the local authority, South Dublin County Council, and communities in South Dublin. It was envisaged that it would involve:

- a fully resourced unit
- trained Community Service Supervisors
- suitable offenders on Community Service Orders
- the support and co-operation of local authorities, statutory agencies and community interests in the South Dublin County Council area.

Following the publication of the *Programme for Government* a working group comprising Probation and Community Service personnel was established in 2007 to scope and plan for a pilot Community Service Graffiti Removal Project in South Dublin, a large suburban area with a significant graffiti problem. The terms of reference for the working group

included examination of Service experience, review of international best practice, and development of an inter-agency approach in Community Service. This led to a review of the Community Service Graffiti removal project in the Tallaght area, which ran from 2000 to 2002. This was followed by a visit to the London Probation Service graffiti removal and site clearance programme, part of its community pay-back schemes in the Harrow/Brent area. These programmes are widely recognised as examples of best practice with good results for Courts, communities and offenders.

While these background preparations were progressing, the working group linked into the Crime Division of the Department of Justice and Law Reform to build on its experience in pilot community anti-graffiti programmes in Dublin City, Bray and Galway in 2006–2007. In addition, wide consultation was undertaken with stakeholders in the criminal justice system, other Government Departments, local authorities and communities, together with a review of available published information and commentary on Community Service in operation.

Development of the pilot

Based on the working group's findings and discussion with South Dublin County Council, a specification for the works to be undertaken in a pilot Community Service Graffiti Removal Project was developed:

1. graffiti removal by power washing of surfaces
2. paint removal where feasible
3. site clearance and painting over graffiti where appropriate.

A Probation Service mini-bus was assigned to the Graffiti Project and modified with high-specification power washer equipment to carry out the tasks involved in graffiti removal.

Material and equipment requirements were identified. Health and Safety guidance and protocols were developed.

It was of critical importance that all members of the pilot team had the required training and competencies to carry out the tasks required. Two dedicated Community Service Supervisors were assigned responsibility for the day-to-day operations including the management and monitoring of Health and Safety issues. Protective clothing was sourced and made

available to all working on the sites. Training was provided to the Supervisors on all aspects of graffiti removal. A Probation Officer was assigned as operations project manager for the pilot, overseeing and co-ordinating the work of the pilot team in consultation with the Senior Probation Officer.

South Dublin County Council used its network of litter wardens and contacts in local communities to manage the identification and communication of tasks to be completed. It also managed the issue of permission where necessary and the monitoring of works completed. The consistent availability of suitable offenders on Community Service Orders to the pilot project was an important requirement to maximise the output, value and effectiveness of the project. The Senior Probation Officers undertook to manage referrals in the area to maintain the flow of offender referrals.

A full Health and Safety assessment of the project plan, staffing, management and operational arrangements and of the vehicle, equipment and materials was completed prior to start-up.

The pilot Community Service Graffiti Removal Project in action

South Dublin County Council provided a weekly update of work sites requiring the removal of graffiti to the team administration office in a spreadsheet format outlining the location, the date of referral, the source of referral, nature of the task and date for completion of work. Each work site was photographed before and after the visit of the Community Service Graffiti Removal team. The pictures were provided as required to South Dublin County Council and the Service to illustrate the work of the pilot. Examples can be accessed on the Probation Service website at www.probation.ie.

Special arrangements were agreed so that emergency tasks – for example, the removal of new highly offensive graffiti – could be done at short notice and take priority in the work programme.

Cleaning materials (specialised chemicals), paint and storage facilities were provided by South Dublin County Council, which also provided access to water hydrants to ensure necessary water supplies through the working day. Equipment, supervision of Community Service workers and work on site was managed by the Probation Service Community Service Supervisors.

The pilot began with a maximum of six offenders working on site. For an initial period two Community Service Supervisors worked together to develop expertise and experience and minimise risks.

A second vehicle driven by the second Community Service Supervisor was introduced during the pilot to provide additional worker capacity and to trial alternative power washing equipment (two smaller and more mobile units carried in the vehicle). This vehicle can work separately or jointly with the first as work tasks demand.

Costs and benefits

With one supervisor and a team of six offenders working an eight-hour day, a total of 48 hours' Community Service work can be provided daily. On a six-day working week with full teams there is capacity for 288 hours of graffiti removal through unpaid Community Service work.

In full operation during the pilot the Community Service graffiti removal team with one vehicle could clear up to 700 square metres of graffiti each week. Chemical costs, on the pilot and other graffiti removal work, have been met by the beneficiaries – in this case, South Dublin County Council.

Operational costs, including fuel, vehicle and equipment maintenance, safety and work equipment, staff and personnel training, health and safety, equipment renewal and miscellaneous costs, are estimated at less than €16,000. If the equivalent work capacity of the workers on Community Service is computed using the minimum wage (€8.65 in 2009) as a basis, the cost/benefit ratio of the offender contribution and the Community Service graffiti removal team is evident and substantial. This project represents a cost-effective and economic graffiti removal service, a value-for-money Community Service sanction for the Probation Service and the Courts and a significant benefit to communities.

Review of the pilot Community Service Graffiti Removal Project

The review at the end of 2009 showed that the project has been an overwhelming success, with potential for extension as part of Community Service in larger urban areas across the country. The review indicated that the project:

- is cost-effective
- offers significant savings and visible benefits for communities using the service
- increases Probation Service capacity to complete Community Service Orders promptly and efficiently
- engages the offender in a disciplined and structured routine similar to regular employment, improving their readiness for employment.

Community Service Supervisors and offenders have provided positive feedback on the project, referring to it as innovative, stimulating, and giving a job perspective and a sense of active contribution. Communities have applauded the work of the Community Service Project team and appreciated the value of the work to their environment. In equipment terms the chemicals used, the power washer units and the work processes proved to be effective, reliable and safe in use.

In cleared areas, repeat graffiti was, in general, significantly less than expected, and where repeat visits were needed local interests took an increased role in discouraging further disfigurement. As a result the Community Service Graffiti Removal Project achieved a much faster clearance rate across the South Dublin area than anticipated, and facilitated capacity to expand to additional areas.

For the offenders there was a sense of job satisfaction and making a difference in communities in working as part of the Community Service Graffiti Removal Project. The appreciation of communities and neighbourhoods for the work done strengthened the commitment of the offenders involved, and there were clear benefits in terms of consistent attendance, good working and reduced warnings.

Key learning

The ongoing availability of appropriate sites combined with the timely completion of work is essential in maintaining morale, momentum and high-quality results. Without a good flow of Community Service Order referrals, consistency of the work done can be disrupted and credibility and reliability undermined. Ongoing training for Community Service Supervisors, particularly in relation to Health and Safety matters and offender management, is important to maintain standards.

Thorough planning, research and consultation with all stakeholders are essential to achieve an effective project and good results. Clear allocation of project management and operation monitoring tasks in a transparent structure must be in place from the beginning. Development of partnerships with all stakeholders, with detailed records of undertakings and ongoing clear lines of communication, is a prerequisite.

Conclusion

In terms of the benefit to the environment, the Community Service Graffiti Removal Project effectively removed eyesores from neighbourhoods and communities and had a visible positive effect. It is reported to have contributed to community wellbeing and satisfaction by addressing unmet needs promptly, efficiently and without fuss. While many people are incensed and offended by the presence of graffiti and angry with the perpetrators, there was also satisfaction that offenders were working to remedy the problem.

Offenders on Community Service have made reparation to their communities in a way that was clearly welcomed, valued and appreciated. There was often positive feedback from the the public to offenders, which for some may have never occurred before, thereby improving levels of self-esteem and job satisfaction.

Neighbourhoods and community groups have been quick to acknowledge the benefit of the work done and for the offenders it is visible reparation to the community. Local and national media attention has been positive in endorsing the value and contribution of Community Service, and the graffiti removal project in particular, in neighbourhoods and communities.

For Courts and the Criminal Justice System in general, graffiti removal is a visible and effective sanction with clear reparation and benefits to the community. In reducing committals to custody, it reduces costs to the community as a whole.

The review of the pilot Graffiti Removal Project has shown that it is a success as a quality service provider to communities. It yields valuable lessons for the expanded use of Community Service across Ireland.

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Reference

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Available at www.taoiseach.gov.ie