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From Times Online

November 27, 2008

# Offenders on community work projects will have to wear orange bibs

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Tens of thousands of criminals sentenced to community punishment are to be forced from next week to wear high visibility orange bibs identifying them as offenders.

The fluorescent orange clothing will bear the words "community payback" on the back and front so that the public knows they are offenders doing physical work as part of their community sentence.

At any one time 35,000 offenders are doing community payback, which involves projects ranging from clearing derelict land to restoring buildings and decorating community centres.

Community payback is often undertaken by people who have no welfare problems. It is often handed out to those convicted of being drunk and disorderly, of anti-social behaviour and of causing criminal damage as well as for high-level drink and driving, and white collar offences such as fraud.

Jack Straw will formally announce the move next week after years of attempts by ministers to put offenders in uniforms as a way of convincing the public that community punishment is not a soft option.

Previous attempts to make offenders working in the community more visible have been resisted by workers in the probation service. Tonight the move provoked a furious response from the National Association of Probation Officers, which said it would lead to reprisal attacks on offenders, particularly in areas where there are problems with gangs.

The move was recommended by Louise Casey, the former head of the Government's Respect Task Force, earlier this year in a report examining ways of improving confidence in the criminal justice system.

An instruction sent to all probation services earlier this month said the orange visibility vests must bear the logo "community payback" in purple and green. The wording on the front must not be less than 9 centimetres (3½ inches) high and on the back not less than 30cm high.

The note said: "The intention not to humiliate or stigmatise remains the same but this circular creates a clearer association between the offenders and the work that they do through Community Payback."

Young offenders under the age of 18 will escape wearing the distinctive orange bib, the instruction said.

It also recognises that there could be risks of vigilante action against offenders if they are visible to the public while working in the community. The note said: "The safety of staff and of offenders is still paramount and Community Payback should still be responsive to local concerns."

Previous efforts to highlight work carried out by offenders while on community punishment have included plaques on completed worksites and badges on vehicles and jackets.

The National Association of Probation Officers (Napo) claimed that the compulsory wearing of orange bibs by offenders was demeaning and potentially dangerous.

It said it would be dangerous as high visibility could lead to easy identification and the targeting of offenders by others from rival gangs.

The association said there had been three incidents in recent months of shootings at projects, including one in east London which was gang related.

A statement said: "Napo believes that making the individuals more prominent will increase the risk of violent attacks and provocation.

"In addition, negative reaction by individuals forced to wear the labelled clothing may lead to either aggressive responses to the requirement or refusal to work."

Harry Fletcher, the association's assistant general secretary, said: "The Government is claiming that this initiative is being introduced to raise public awareness. The real intention of the vests is to make the Government look tougher on crime and to demean the offenders".

The Ministry of Justice said: "We will be launching the jackets on Monday. We agree with the public, who strongly believe that justice must be done, but also seen to be done."

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