

Community Orders

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Community Orders

A Community Order is a court sentence that is handed out by magistrates and judges when they have decided that an offender is to remain in the community to undertake their punishment rather than going to prison.

The Community Order is flexible and can be made up of any combination of up to 12 individual requirements that the offender must follow. The selection of requirements depends on the offenders' criminal history and the nature and seriousness of the offences. This tailor-made approach allows sentencers to mix and match different requirements of a community order to best suit the crime and the offender, which makes rehabilitation - and reductions in re-offending more likely.

Certain crimes carry automatic prison sentences but for some, less serious offences, community sentences are passed by the courts as an alternative tough and challenging form of punishment.

Sentencers use guidelines issued by the Sentencing Guidelines Council to help them decide whether to issue a fine, community sentence, prison sentence, discharge or combination of these sentencing options. When passing sentences, magistrates consider how the sentences will:

- protect the public
- punish the offender
- reduce crime
- rehabilitate the offender
- provide opportunities for offenders to make reparation to the victim or victims of their offence.

The 12 Requirements

ONE - Compulsory Unpaid Work

An Unpaid Work Requirement can be for between 40 and 300 hours and must be completed in 12 months. This involves demanding and constructive activities, such as cleaning up graffiti, making public areas safer or conservation work. The local community benefits from the work and residents are able to suggest projects for offenders on Unpaid Work to carry out.

TWO - Participation in any specified activities

May include improving basic skills such as reading, writing and numeracy.

THREE - Programmes

These are aimed at changing offenders' thinking and behaviour. For example, the Enhanced Thinking Skills Programme makes offenders realise the consequences of their actions and teaches them to make less impulsive decisions.

FOUR - Prohibition from certain activities

Offenders may be ordered not to take part in certain activities at specified times, such as attending football matches. If offenders do not comply with this requirement, they can be sent back to the courts for re-sentencing.

FIVE - Curfew

An offender may be ordered to stay at a particular location for certain hours of the day or night. Curfews help to structure an offender's life and break the cycle of offending. Offenders will normally wear an electronic tag during this part of their sentence.

SIX - Mental Health Treatment

After taking professional advice, the court may decide that the offender's sentence should include mental health treatment.

SEVEN - Exclusion

An offender may be prohibited from certain areas (for up to two years) and will normally have to wear an electronic tag during that time.

EIGHT - Residence

An offender may be required to live in a specified place such as Approved Premises, which are sometimes called Probation hostels.

NINE - Alcohol treatment

This requirement is appropriate for offenders whose crime is linked to alcohol abuse and treatment must last for at least six months.

TEN - Drug Rehabilitation

If offenders commit crimes linked to drug abuse, they may be required to go on a Drug Rehabilitation Programme. Programmes last for between six months and three years, and may involve monthly reviews of an offender's progress.

ELEVEN - supervision

An offender may be required to attend appointments with a Probation Officer/ Offender Manager for up to 36 months. The focus of the supervision and the frequency of contact will be specified in the sentence plan based on the particular issues the offender needs to work on. The length of a supervision requirement must be the overall period for which the Community Order is in force.

TWELVE - Attendance Centre

For offenders under 25, the court can direct the offender to spend between 12 and 36 hours at an attendance centre over a set period of time. The offender will be required to be present for a maximum of three hours per attendance on each occasion. The attendance centre requirement offers a structure opportunity for offenders to address their offending behaviour in a group environment while imposing a restriction on their leisure time.

National Figures on Community Orders

The NAO report published on 31 January 2008 said that 97.5% of community order requirements are completed and that community sentences can reduce reconvictions proportionally more than custodial sentences.

Reoffending rates for offenders subject to community punishments are lower than those for short-sentenced prisoners. The latest figures show that frequency of re-offending for community sentences have been reduced by 13%. The re-offending rate following a short custodial sentence is 59.7%. The re-offending rate following a community sentence is 37.9%.

Nationally the total number of hours of completed Unpaid Work is more than six million hours.