



**HARD AT WORK:** Simon Burns MP, right, with Essex Probations Communication Officer, Lynn McKay and ex-offenders as they clear up the churchyard at Holy Trinity Church, Springfield

# Criminals in pay back for their crimes

## Community schemes to benefit others

By **Steve Clow**

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IN THE war movie *The Dirty Dozen*, criminals are given the chance to redeem themselves by joining Uncle Sam for a dangerous mission.

It may lack Hollywood's glamour, but here in Essex offenders are putting something positive back into the community.

Convicted drug addicts, drink-drivers, thieves and wife beaters are involved in Community Payback.

Having been sentenced by the court to undertake unpaid work this is often a preferred alternative to being locked up.

Instead of languishing in cells, offenders help local schools, allotments, village halls and churches to get shipshape.

### Organisation

Lynne McKay, communications manager for Essex Probation Service, said: "We only take on projects where the organisation is not able to pay a firm."

"Where we have people with certain skills we try and match them with those who could benefit from learning first hand."

Every year about £2m worth of unpaid work is completed through Community Payback.

Essex Probation Service handles 950 offenders every week that put in a total of 350,000 hours of unpaid work every year.

Chelmsford Probation officers successfully placed 75 per cent of the 408 men and women ordered to work unpaid by magistrates' and crown courts between April 2008 and February 2009.

National statistics show that 60 per cent of offenders who go to prison re-offend within 12 months of release – the figure for Community Payback is just 38 per cent.

Mrs McKay said risk assess-



**CLEAN UP:** Ex Offenders meet Simon Burns MP

ment was carried out for all projects as well as on each offender.

"Work groups number a maximum of eight per supervisor, are driven in marked vans, and none are allowed off-site."

Westlands Community Primary School is among their satisfied customers. Trevor Cohen, site manager, said offenders undertook a range of tasks including decorating and ground maintenance.

He said: "Without these guys I would be snowed under and they also saved the school thousands of pounds which it doesn't have."

Offenders regularly work at the churchyard at Panfield parish church and in July a team tackled an overgrown section of graveyard near Trinity Church, Springfield,

after a plea from Chelmsford West MP Simon Burns.

Mrs McKay said: "They did a marvellous job. The team returned last week to finish off and Simon came along to thank them for their good work."

The jewel in the crown has been the creation of a sensory garden at Columbus College, formerly The Woodlands School, Chelmsford.

Mrs McKay said: "The project went so well, we are now in the early stages of creating two more sensory gardens."

Ex-offender 'Alan' remains sceptical saying after 150 hours work he did not feel he had contributed to the community: "They asked an office worker to use power tools, which I refused."

"I didn't feel safe with power tools, let alone seeing them in the hands of some of those I was forced to work alongside."

"My background is web design and I would have been a lot happier putting a website together or teaching IT."

But Mrs McKay said non-tradespeople could work in the 'back room' of charity shops, and were a welcome addition to their band of volunteers.

## Criteria for having work done

**Five projects in mid Essex which offenders have taken on in a bid to pay back for their crimes.**

- Painting and decorating classrooms at Notley Green Primary School, Great Notley
- Conservation work at the Public Gardens, Braintree
- Conservation and painting at Longmeads Community Centre, Writtle
- Erecting sheds, concreting footpaths and conservation at Roundwood Disabled Centre, Bocking

Community Payback will only be drafted in if a project meets six tests:

- It must benefit the local community
- It must not take paid work away from others
- No-one must make a profit from the work
- It must be challenging and demanding
- It must be worthwhile and constructive
- Offenders must be seen to be putting something back into the community