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## Electronic Tags and Stricter Unpaid Work to Combat Prison Crowding

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The Ministry of Justice has announced plans to expand the use of electronic monitoring and make unpaid community work tougher, aiming to free up space in prisons while keeping offenders accountable.

An independent review of the sentencing framework, released in February, recommended placing greater emphasis on punishments outside of prison to reduce reoffending and ease capacity pressures in the prison system. Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood has pledged

to reinforce community punishments and ensure that unpaid work delivers real benefits to communities affected by crime.

One example is the work carried out by offenders at the Nene Valley Railway near Peterborough. The heritage railway, best known for housing the engine that inspired Reverend W Awdry's Thomas the Tank Engine, has been hosting groups of low to medium-risk offenders who assist in re-laying track. Michael Purcell, the Nene Valley Railway chair, said: "We've been working with the probation service for over 20 years. Most of the work here is done by volunteers, and many of them are quite old. So to have a team of younger workers that can come here and do the physical work under an experienced supervisor as a community service is massively helpful to us."

## Reducing Reoffending

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) says its research shows that community-based sentences are more effective at cutting reoffending rates compared to prison terms of less than a year. The physically demanding work on projects like Nene Valley is part of a wider approach to deter repeat offending and help offenders reintegrate into the workforce.

Michael Barry, who has supervised such work for two decades, believes the approach works. "You do notice that the men and women who come to work here don't tend to come back," he said. "I've been supervising groups here for 20 years, and many of the offenders who have worked here seem to have gone back to working. So I do believe it helps people return to work after offending."

The government stresses that being tough on crime includes ensuring enough prison space for the most dangerous offenders and strengthening community punishments.

To support this, the MoJ will increase probation funding by up to £700 million, nearly a 45% rise. This funding will allow for a significant increase in the number of offenders monitored through electronic tagging. Alongside tagging, the ministry intends to expand the use of curfews and exclusion zones to keep certain offenders away from specific areas, further reducing the strain on the prison estate.

A Ministry of Justice spokesperson said: "Offenders should be made to give back to the communities they've harmed. That is why we are toughening up unpaid work as a punishment so it can continue to act as a deterrent and make our streets safer. Projects like

Nene Valley are a great example of how hard work ensures offenders pay for their crimes. We want to see more projects like this and are talking with councils and businesses to put more offenders to work.”