

Payback time is giving a lift to town's amenities

By DAVID BLACKMORE

A team of offenders have been transforming a new youth facility as part of a scheme to rejuvenate neglected areas in a west Norfolk town.

The community payback team, a joint initiative between the county's safer neighbourhood teams and probation, has been targeting run-down areas in Downham Market since August.

The team has already tackled a ditch and bridge between the Tesco car park and The Rowans as well as the car park in Wesley Close.

The offenders have been focusing their attention on Downham Youth Project's new base, opposite the Howdale Community Centre, over the last two weekends.

Ben Hyde, project manager, said: "I had no idea the team was going to be coming along here until about three weeks ago and it has been such a massive relief to have them here.

"The team came along this weekend and the weekend before and have completely transformed the main hall, lounge area and two other rooms.

"They have got rid of the nasty blue gloss and now these rooms are all white. The main hall now looks like a really nice, fresh, clean and friendly place for people to come in."

The community payback team will return to the new youth facility this weekend to finish off the paint job.

Mr Hyde continued: "They have been putting in a lot of man hours which we quite simply wouldn't have been able to put in with everything



PAYBACK: Matt Webb (left) and Andy Lott working at the youth project.

else we have going on.

"They have worked really hard and wanted to make sure each room was a really good standard and their work has been a huge plus for us.

"The team has also done some weeding around the hut so the outside looks better and I really can't thank them enough for what they have done so far."

The Downham Youth Project started in 2007 after fears were raised about youngsters causing antisocial behaviour in the town.

The project had to hire rooms to run after-school clubs and evening youth cafés. But Mr Hyde said the

permanent base could open its doors for teenagers to access the internet, play games and meet with friends later this month.

He continued: "Once the painting has been done, we will only then have to furnish the hut and I hope we will be able to launch in two weeks."

When it is opened youngsters will be able to enjoy an after-school club on Mondays from 3pm to 5pm and an evening youth café on Tuesday evenings from 7.30pm to 9.30pm.

Mr Hyde said he also wants to explore running specific interest-based projects such as DJ tuition with the teenagers.

He continued: "We are hoping the youngsters will see this as a nice, friendly place that they can meet their friends to relax for free and go on the internet.

"We are also awaiting a decision on a £160,000 grant for a full-time team working together to have three after-school clubs and maybe three youth clubs every week."

Pam Sharp, a voluntary co-ordinator for the community payback scheme, is delighted with the transformation of the new youth facility and other neglected areas in the town.

She said: "They are making a wonderful job of the youth hut and I am glad the Downham Youth Project has been able to benefit from the scheme.

"The team has really been transforming the town. Every week they have been here for about three days a week and the town is looking so much cleaner. I have had so many people saying to me what a great job they have done."

She added: "It is really a win-win situation. The offenders pick up new skills and people will notice the huge improvements around the town as well as the neglected areas."

The next painting project for the team of offenders will be the town hall with the gardening team moving on to The Willows area.

The work carried out by the community payback team is designed to be demanding and constructive and also give offenders the chance to learn new, practical skills to help them out of a life of crime and into a steady job.

Picture: IAN BURT