

Report on Neighbourhood Watch Summit

Friday November 15th 2013

**Lord Knight's Suite, Tally Ho! Conference Suite, Pershore Road, Edgbaston B5
7RN**

Background

Neighbourhood Watch (NW) schemes have existed within the communities of the West Midlands Policing area for approximately 30 years. Support in setting up and communication with NW Coordinators became the remit of West Midlands Police Crime Prevention Officers. A West Midlands County network of NW schemes was established at this time, which aimed to develop the selection of NW reps from each of the policing areas, with a specific point of contact. With the advent of Operation Paragon and the rationalisation of police resources, the introduction of local policing teams meant LPU's became responsible for this role.

In the spring of 2013, the Police and Crime Commissioner requested a briefing on how effective LPU's were carrying out that policy across the region. Feedback was of a disparate picture, with some excellent practice but also gaps in support in other areas. Following a meeting with the NW County representative Malcolm Bird OBE, the Commissioner agreed to host a summit at which existing and future ways of working with Neighbourhood Watch could be discussed.

Aims of the summit

- To hear from delegates which new ways of communication, support and strategic structures they would welcome from West Midlands Police and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.
- To look at establishing a central database of neighbourhood watch schemes and their co-ordinators
- Celebrate the good practice of schemes within the region and nationally.
- Share the experience of Streetwatch representatives on Birmingham East Local Policing Unit

Summary of speakers

Jim Madden, National Neighbourhood Watch Network Chairperson.

Jim outlined the role of the national organisation which supports existing membership and encourages new members. He recalled the inception of NW in the United States 50 years ago and its valuable current role in improving the quality of life and quality of local areas through the work of volunteers. Now members were tweeters, not twitchers. Nationally the organisation was working with government agencies and the College of Policing. He celebrated some examples of good practice within the West Midlands highlighting a junior NW in Walsall, Streetly NW which has an effective partnership with the National Health Service, Youth Services and the Police, and Staffordshire Canal Watch. He maintained that local organisations had a valuable role in ensuring vital community cohesion within an aging population that looked out for its elderly and vulnerable. Neighbourhood Watch as an organisation was awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Award in 2012, and he commended NW members for being the 'eyes and ears' in their communities. Research by the University of Newcastle had shown that it is being observed that most deters people from committing a crime.

Chief Superintendent Alex Murray, Birmingham East LPU Commander

Chief Superintendent Murray was accompanied by members of Streetwatch volunteers from Birmingham East. He began by comparing the fortunes of the Royal Lifeboats Institute and the district of Balsall Heath's problem with prostitutes. The former was seen as an exemplar voluntary organisation, that in fact suffered a loss of voluntary contributions when it received mainstream government support, to such a degree that they ended up declining state aid in order to survive as a grass roots organisation. In Basall Heath, community action formed the Basall Heath Forum, responsible for patrolling the streets and removing the soliciting problems, far more successfully than previously expensive Vice Squad operations. CS Murray used these to illustrate that police must work with a community - the number of Police in West Midlands Police Force will only have a limited difference to crime levels – it is only when communities decide that crime levels are unacceptable that there is a larger impact on reducing crime. He echoed Jim Madden's comments on how NW was important in creating community cohesion, quoting Washwood Heath NW which had a membership drawn from all faiths, visibly working together to respond to counter terrorism and maintain good communications across its networks. Trust and Confidence in the Police was highest where good communication was in place, and was not dependant on levels of deprivation. He saw the relationship between NW Coordinators and the Force working best where there was the following:-

- Better flow of information from WMP to neighbourhood watch on crime; fast tracked intelligence by a preferred method of contact
- Support for victims of crime, especially after burglary
- NW coordinators acting as intermediaries, rapidly mobilised when trust in the Police has broken down
- West Midlands Police making it their role to enable neighbourhood watch members to work with the Force.
- The Police and Crime Commissioner to encourage the public to set up NW groups in areas where there were gaps.

John Ford, NW Coordinator in Dorridge

John talked about increasing the number of people involved in NW, creating a network across the region that provided support via information and existing good practice. Whilst crime was falling, so were police resources, so he said that it was important that schemes were more effective on crime prevention in order to maintain the fall in crime and anti-social behaviour. John gave a presentation on how his group of volunteers in Dorridge have tackled signal crimes, improving the local environment so that the area looks better cared for by carrying out graffiti removal, pond clearance, and cutting back overgrown greenery to improve community safety. John agreed with the view that better quality, timely information would enable NW groups to organise better solutions to members and prevent there being more victims of crime.

Ray Jones, Neighbourhood Watch Coordinator, Street Coordinator and webmaster for the regional Neighbourhood and Home Watch Forum.

Ray presented a clear vision for NW in the West Midlands. He articulated some options for consideration by delegates including a Communications Network, proposing how representation on a county-wide and regional body might be achieved. He explained how this might link with West Midlands Police and Local Authority's at neighbourhood, area and regional levels, subject to a memorandum of understanding. This would allow

neighbourhood watch representatives to be involved as part of operational, strategic and emerging policy discussions around community safety.

Roundtable discussions

Delegates were initially asked by Ray Jones to discuss their response to the options for a county-wide and regional NW structure.

Police and Crime Commissioner Bob Jones requested that delegates also gave an indication of what was required now to improve the effectiveness of NW and Street Watch.

1. Attendees were asked to indicate whether they were in favour of the formation of a County-wide NW structure and /or representation at a Regional structure (including West Mercia, West Midlands, Staffordshire, and Warwickshire Force areas).

There was a strong priority expressed for efforts to be concentrated on improving relationships and partnership working at the grass roots level first before consideration was given to electing representatives to structures with a more strategic focus. Once we had the local structures in place, a County structure would be welcomed.

2. Attendees were also asked 'What was required now to improve the effectiveness of neighbourhood watch and Street Watch?'
- Publicity and promotion of neighbourhood watch and Streetwatch generally by the PCC, WMP and Local Authority community safety partners
 - Training on how to be a NW/Streetwatch Co-ordinator
 - A strong awareness that there was a need to actively encourage younger members of the community to become involved –including recruitment through schools, junior Warden schemes, PSHE sessions.
 - Availability of crime reduction/safety items/literature/street signs
 - A lot of comments on communication – the need for good quality, regular messages giving details of incidents, modus operandi in a timely way from the Police. Social Media and IT were supported by many as the method for swift two way communication, however many coordinators acknowledged they were not internet savvy
 - Equally, there was much comment on the need to update current contact lists held by the Police for groups and individuals members. It was suggested a more coordinated relationship and contact structure was created in each LPU area with the creation of a shared directory of coordinators. Attendees wanted to know who else exists in their area, what patterns of crime are affecting the whole area and to be able to offer a mentoring scheme to new groups.
3. StreetWatch: A number of representatives were present at the summit from Birmingham East LPU. They made some additional comments specific to their roles:
- Information on Street Watch needs to be shared with NW coordinators across the areas

- There is a need for a strategy for how NW and Streetwatch could complement each other's activity, whilst ensuring Streetwatch is given equal access to NW on decision making forums.
- Streetwatch teams also need the ability to link up together, have a shared directory, and share good practice.

Main points of feedback made during the Panel question and answer session, chaired by Commissioner Bob Jones.

1. Several people wanted more information on the role of the county-wide and regional structures; wishing to examine what added value they would bring in terms of training, access to funding and information materials for the additional commitment. *Response: A County Association can provide training, information on best practice, security information and templates for funding applications.*
2. Representatives from Streetwatch wanted to know how their activity might be acknowledged and aligned to NW. *Response: Streetwatch is acknowledged on the national Neighbourhood Watch website www.ourwatch.org.uk*
3. Others stated that the local level structures and communication paths needed to be improved and embedded first before consideration of other structures.
4. Dudley representatives said the relationships were working well. Improved communications streams would enable mentoring schemes for new groups, but improvement was seen in terms of access to contact officers rather than computer software. *Response: The Commissioner said Government grant cuts inevitably means cuts in numbers of Police personnel and new methods of cheaper communication are therefore being explored. Jim Madden added that social media allowed information to get to people no longer prepared to attend meetings, and encouraged communication from a younger age group.*
5. There were representatives from several tables that supported work in schools to encourage the involvement of young people.
6. Telephone, email and SMS were preferred over VC relay as a method to receive messages from the Force.
7. Funds to print literature and renewed access to past publications like 'Beat the Burglar' were requested in order for NW Coordinators to be more effective. *Response: The National Association is looking at securing funding for leaflets and will announce if this is successful.*
8. There was a request to update and distribute a list of coordinators contact details. At the same time, some members called for a relaxation on the qualifications to be a registered neighbourhood watch scheme. Wolverhampton representatives said they had actively sought to increase the number of members and new groups, identifying the gaps in coverage and carrying out recruitment through door knocking. *Response: CS Murray welcomed the advice of the Neighbourhood and Home Watch Network Chairperson on how to share a directory of contacts whilst still complying with data protection and would progress this.*

Closing remarks by Commissioner Bob Jones

The commissioner concluded that the event had highlighted the good work in existence by neighbourhood watch groups, but also the need to identify where there were gaps in engagement and struggling groups. He stated the feedback from the roundtable discussions would be captured and translated into an action plan.

A database of NW coordinators on each LPU would be set up and a preferred method of contact established. The majority of those attending had made it clear that they wished to work with West Midlands Police and their local Authorities to make local structures effective. The Commissioner supported the desire to grow from the grass roots as the most sustainable route, urged people to examine their ability to learn from each other and promised that the Office would host another event in one year's time at which time progress would be presented together with new options of good practice.

Finally, he praised all participants in the room for their continuing hard work and efforts to improve the quality of life and safety of their communities.

