

## LIFE IN A RURAL VILLAGE & NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

I first got involved in the Neighbourhood Watch scheme when my wife, who is a Village Councillor, mentioned it had been discussed in general terms at a council meeting. Although I had heard of the scheme I had never thought about joining one - visions of people patrolling the streets in hi-vis jackets with torches and Alsatians immediately sprang to mind, why I thought that I had no idea, but as I was to discover later it was a thought that didn't just occur to me either. Having come to the conclusion that I was being unfair with such images and knowing little about the scheme I decided I would take the bull by the horns and put myself forward as a street co-ordinator to really understand what it entailed.

I live on the outskirts of a village called Treuddyn in North Wales, this is a very pretty part of the world and the road I live on particularly so, having houses on one side and farmers fields on the other. Although it may seem like a quiet country environment the road is quite busy with farmers coming and going with their sheep, delivery vans forever searching for houses with similar sounding Welsh names and occasionally people stopping their cars on the verge to make calls trying to find elusive residences, or just to have a rest after the stress of having finally found the right house proves to much for them. The road is also used by various people to take walks, either with canine companions on leads or as I do, with Sons and Daughters (not leashed).

Given the backdrop described above we have not had a huge amount of crime, a few incidents of anti-social behaviour - the most serious being hay bales in the field across the road being set alight. However, one of the houses was broken into a few months earlier which certainly put me on my guard, the old "crime doesn't happen round here" adage was thrown out of the window and it was perhaps being reminded of this incident more than anything else that probably influenced my decision to join up.

To get the ball rolling I made contact with the area Police Community Support Officer Andrea Ellis who came round to my house to deliver a Watch/Online Watch Link (OWL) application form and give me an overview of the scheme and the signing up process. I needed to get names and addresses (including email if possible) for people of the road keen to join in the scheme and also to nominate a deputy. Andrea very kindly said once I had got the form completed she would come back and pick it up when she was in the neighbourhood and deliver it to the relevant area for processing. With Officer Ellis showing such a commendable attitude to the scheme I was energised to get up and down my road and start signing up the troops immediately!

The next day I set out on the quest, taking care to ensure I had my registration form and my business cards (useful both for identification and for writing messages on for people who weren't available to call me should they wish to join). The first couple of houses were a doddle being my next door neighbours who I socialise with 'over the fence' regularly. As I moved down the road the sudden realisation came over me, I'd lived here for 10 years and I didn't know half the people's names in the houses and some I couldn't even put a face to, this was a bit of a revelation. After an hour or so (I was invited in for tea at two houses) I had enough names to complete the form and the reception I got from those I met was extremely welcoming and positive. I'd also managed to make a few new acquaintances and felt quite uplifted by the whole experience. I held onto the form for a couple of weeks and retraced my steps to pick up other potential members I hadn't managed to contact the first time. It was interesting to hear people talk to me about the scheme with the same mixture of unknowingness and assumptions of patrolling I had before speaking to PCSO Ellis. I assured people that we would not do that and that it was more about the community just keeping an eye out for each other and being aware of what may present itself as an opportunity for crime.

PCSO Ellis took the form and a week or so later contacted me to tell me she was delivering the Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinator & members packs. As the police car reversed into my drive, I peered anxiously through the rear window trying to see how many hi-vis jackets, boxes of torches and excitable Alsatians were perched on the back seat. I haven't been mislead then I thought, seeing none were visible. However watching PCSO Ellis with large two bags coming up my drive, the thought that maybe we get Alsatian puppies to start off with leapt quickly to mind ! I took the bags and quickly opened them to see which puppy I would choose for my own but it was with relief that all I found inside were my Street Co-ordinator pack and a lovely co-ordinators handbook in a fetching black

bag. Browsing through my handbook and all the quality leaflets, stickers and goodies inside (including Covert & Overt marker pen for your household items) I was impressed - "They treat the Co-ordinators very well - look at all this" I said, only to be flummoxed as my wife showed me that the same great stuff was also in each street members pack. Such was the quality of the pack, I couldn't wait to deliver it to the members, no tatty photocopied rubbish here - the pack sends out the statement that this is serious scheme and has so much good information in it I defy anyone to read it and not learn something about removing the opportunity for crime or how to make their home safer.

After reading the manual I decided to take another step into the world of Neighbourhood Watching and leap into cyberspace and log onto the Online Watch Link (OWL). This proved painless to get into and provides an excellent way to set-up new members, communicate with your existing members, be informed of crimes that have taken place and also raise any problems or issues you have. OWL also provides email alerts for crimes on a daily basis (for those without, the alerts can be printed out if required). I used the OWL system to inform members about the potential of getting Neighbourhood Watch street signs placed on our road.

A few days after setting the scheme up, I received a welcome letter from the Neighbourhood Watch team and forms to allow me to sort out getting signs erected on our road. Easy I thought, we don't have lamp-posts on our road but we do have telephone poles and as long as they don't have electricity running to them we're in ! I walked the top part of our road and found to suitable locations for signs, however at the bottom end of our road, the local electric and phone company must have been saving on poles as an electricity cable runs alongside the wires on the poles, as a certain Mr H.Simpson may say "DOH!". Still all was not lost I contacted the Neighbourhood Watch team and they were great in suggesting alternative options for fences etc which I discussed with my members and think we can now have a solution to get signs erected the length of the road which is great.

We are still very young as a scheme in our road, however I feel that just by being within the scheme we are re-enforcing the good neighbour spirit and have both the information and practical support to help us succeed.

In summary I would suggest to anyone that asks to join a Neighbourhood Watch scheme, it is a great idea backed up by seriously dedicated support teams, fantastic information and most importantly helps make you and your neighbours less likely to be the target of crime. I'm so impressed that I have asked that we include a page on our community website to extol the virtues of the scheme and hopefully get the more and more areas within the village to join.

Don't think about it, join or set one up a scheme in your area. You won't regret it.

Gary Short  
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