

Police Review

New Opportunity for Police Officers to Reduce Crime and Disorder

The National Neighbourhood Watch Association two-way radio project is in its second year and Neighbourhood Watch members are now seeing the benefits of NNWA's partnership with Motorola - "NNWA Official Telecommunications Sponsor and Radio Partner". Police officers and community safety practitioners are also witnessing the positive effects two-way radio has on reducing crime and anti social behaviour and how it can help tackle the increasing fear of crime by raising confidence of the radio users and their neighbours. The original Neighbourhood Watch philosophy of "looking out for each other" now encompasses "listening out for each other" too.

A multi agency approach between Tunbridge & Malling Borough Council, Kent Police and Neighbourhood Watch members in Snodland, Kent has successfully used two-way radios in crime "hot spots". PC Mick Wright explained, "Neighbourhood Watch members with radios can talk to each other "real time", identifying the movements of suspicious vehicles or people and keeping a very close eye on anti-social behaviour. They can make sure the police are kept up to date with real first-class quality information and intelligence." The two-way radios were used as part of a pro-active crime reduction package, enabling the community and the police to work together to tackle vehicle crime, daytime burglary and theft from outbuildings. The information gathered has led to high profile arrests with up to 40% reduction in crime.

Warwickshire Police in Water Orton, Coleshill have issued two-way radios in troubled areas, following crime trends. Neighbourhood Watch co ordinators use two-way radios as a deterrent. PC Wayne Cooke, the local Community Safety Officer, says "Not only are the radios effective to help fight crime but enable the community to keep an eye on vulnerable people". Signs have also been posted informing the public that radio surveillance operates in the area.

Newton Regis Neighbourhood Watch members are also using two-way radios to combat crime and anti social behaviour. The area Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator commented “We’ve found the radio system to be a very valuable asset and it has so far proved its worth on several occasions and we now have a very much reduced crime level”.

In evaluating Neighbourhood Watch two-way radio schemes there is conclusive evidence that the police have a large part to play in helping to set up schemes and being involved on an ongoing basis through the local beat officers, community safety officers or Neighbourhood Watch liaison officers. Those areas where Neighbourhood Watch members have been given very little guidance from their local police have often shown poor results due to the lack of understanding of how two-way radios can be deployed to the best effect. To be successful, a radio scheme needs to be a two way partnership between the Neighbourhood Watch radio users and local community safety agencies.

By introducing two-way radio to the neighbourhood, the police can also empower the local community to deal with their problems and give them a chance to be proactive rather than reactive with regard to local crime concerns. This reflects the Government’s Crime Reduction Strategy which states “Government action alone cannot solve the problem - the potential benefits of the measures in our strategy will be greatly enhanced if the public get involved in the process, and if communities come together to take control of their neighbourhoods for the benefit of all”.

The Local Government and Rating Act 1997 encourages local councils to participate in new crime reduction initiatives, maintain current schemes and to assist others in doing so. The act also empowers local councils to install and maintain equipment to assist in the detection and reduction of crime. The most popular type of equipment is CCTV, which, although very acceptable in a high street application, may not be so appropriate in suburbs or villages. Two-way radios for use within the community by and between members of local neighbourhood watch schemes, the police and other community safety agencies provide an alternative to CCTV and often have the added benefit of improving relationships between these groups.

A recent evaluation of a two-way radio scheme in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, using Motorola radios, is a good example. Inspector Steve Lavin commented “There was a substantial improvement in communication between participants, police, other local agencies and neighbours giving a knock on effect of improving community relations”. In Inspector Lavin’s survey prior to his evaluation, 92% thought communication with the police was poor or at best acceptable. Following the evaluation this completely changed to 84% of respondents saying communication was good or very good. NNWA supports his views that increased communication helps to build the trust and confidence of the public which is essential for effective policing.

Many police officers believe the fear of crime alone can have negative consequences for the community, irrespective of the actual risk, and therefore as an issue of social concern has to be taken as seriously as crime prevention and reduction. During the short period of Inspector Lavin’s evaluation, there was a clear reduction in the fear of crime. Participants who felt it was likely they would be victims of crime dropped dramatically from 91% to 15%, and those who felt crime and disorder was high or very high in the area fell from 100% to 23% - a drop of 77%. The evaluation enabled Inspector Lavin to see the immediate positive impact of the radios and how they could be deployed in the future. He felt that with more radios and over a longer period of time, the project could have a positive impact on crime and disorder in the Rotherham area.

A vigilant public, which has the means to gather and disseminate information, can be of enormous help to police officers involved in crime reduction and community safety. Two-way radio is proving to be an ideal tool enabling instant communication between Neighbourhood Watch members, either on a “one to one” or “one to many” basis. If a local beat officer or a local authority worker such as a Neighbourhood Warden or caretaker also carries a radio, they can be included in the communication loop. However, NNWA always makes it clear to members that they must never depend on there being a Neighbourhood Watch radio carrying police officer on duty locally and should always use traditional means of communication in an emergency.

The Neighbourhood Watch two-way radio schemes currently use Neighbourhood Watch branded Motorola two-way radios. This “easy to use” consumer radio operates on the licence-free PMR 446 waveband. The radios are a very cost effective solution as there are no set up, maintenance cost or airtime charges – you simply charge the batteries, with the charger pack and start talking instantly with your community group. – all at a cost considerably below a CCTV system.

Out of approximately 155,000 Neighbourhood Watch schemes there is still only a small percentage using two-way radios. Many police officers are missing out on a simple but highly effective opportunity to help reduce crime and disorder in their area. However, as the benefits become apparent to police officers and community safety practitioners, NNWA predicts a huge increase in community two-way radio schemes across the UK.

John Howell, Director General, NNWA says. “The Neighbourhood Watch two-way radio project is potentially the biggest initiative in tackling crime and anti social behaviour since the inception of Neighbourhood Watch some 20 years ago but this initiative can only reach its full potential with the co-operation of those involved in community safety.”

A “Two-Way Radio Scheme Toolkit” is being produced by NNWA to help community safety practitioners set up schemes in their area. To order this or for a general information pack, please call 0800 389 3632.

Ends.

Derek White
On behalf of NNWA

Case study and evaluation examples contained in the article supplied by the following Police Officers;

Inspector Martin Wright

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PC Mick Wright

Neighbourhood Watch Police Liaison Officer - Kent Constabulary

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PC Wayne Cook

Community Safety Officer – Warwickshire Police

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Inspector Steve Lavin

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The above police officers have consented to their contact details being made available to other police officers whereby they can pass on useful information and advice to those wanting to set up a community two-way radio scheme or exchange ideas with those already running radio schemes. Please note neither the Home Office, the officers, nor their respective police forces recommend individual communication equipment manufacturers.