

REPORT FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH AGM

8 OCTOBER 2011

NHW BOARD MEMBER AND CARLISLE DISTRICT COUNCILLOR FOR DALSTON WARD MRS NICOLA CLARKE

Just over a year ago I was asked by a dear friend and colleague to join the board of Cumbria Neighbourhood Watch. I was so pleased to have been approached by a member of the board, because my community involvement puts me in touch with many people across a Ward covering thirty square miles and I was keen to use any methods which will keep people connected to each other, watching out for each other and their neighbouring communities, but most of all, being more acutely aware of the possibility of doorstep crime and offences to their neighbourhood.

As a District Councillor community safety and awareness, is one of the issues most commonly raised while speaking or writing to residents, so I immediately knew the value of the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme and was eager to learn more and promote it. The latest profile statistics for the area in which I concentrate most of my work, provides me with a good indication of the lifestyle, age, health and crime rates for the ward. Its population is 6,059 thousand. There is a good young person's population within this figure but in the main, the highest age range is between 30 and 74 years with longevity taking some residents well past the age of 85 years. Most households drive either one or two cars and around 80% own their homes outright or a have a mortgage. I know the area to be reasonably affluent.

The crime rates for the ward are not in themselves too alarming but they do suggest a steady percentage of theft, including theft *from* vehicles and *of* vehicles, criminal damage and burglary. Much of the ward is divided into small hamlets and there are many isolated dwellings and farms.

As I have come to know the area and the lovely folk who live within it, I am constantly building a picture and pattern of likely vulnerability, and the need for additional communication and support. This is where Neighbourhood Watch has come into its own and become a most vital component in the awareness and defence against some crime and the prevention of it.

As District Councillor I am not solely confined to the interests of only those living and residing in the Ward I represent, the wider County Divisional Ward is also accessible to me, which is why I decided to promote Neighbourhood Watch to the parishes of Burgh-by Sands, Beaumont, Thurstonfield & Moorhouse, Great Orton, as well as my own parishes of Dalston, St. Cuthberts Without and Cummersdale.

Over the past year I have managed to do this by including the information within the parish magazines and asking for volunteers to join current

Neighbourhood Watch schemes or start up new ones. The great thing about these parish magazines is that they are produced monthly, the information is delivered by willing volunteers living within the parishes and the most important thing, is that these little magazines are valued and read by the whole community. Therefore, half the work is already done for me – I know that volunteers are out there, all I need to do is to harness their energy, encourage them to become actively involved and promote the benefits of such a worthwhile scheme.

This is not as easy as it sounds – in the first instance I don't want to frighten the good people of the area by giving them the wrong sort of information and being over enthusiastic in my approach, however, I do want to encourage people to be on the look out for anything unusual and to get into the habit of relaying this information using a sensible and coherent method. Very often it takes several attempts to encourage people to see the value of a scheme or to become interested in further involvement. It means regular monthly visits to local parish councils and other forums to 'spread the word'. I have also found that while the Parish Councils are useful to me with the distribution of information and feedback – I need to organise and set up smaller meetings with residents that are much less formal and allow me the opportunity to speak more intimately with different groups. Sometimes I might need to visit an individuals' home and then pass the information onto the local policing team. These visits are not carried out by myself alone – I am usually accompanied by a fellow District Councillor from the area in support of residents needs.

Since beginning my work with Neighbourhood Watch the number of volunteers and uptake for the scheme have been gradually increasing across these areas. The residents of a particular hamlet just outside Dalston village were very keen to be involved, once I had explained how easy the scheme is to implement with the support of the local policing team. These particular residents now support a network of around thirty five homes, which prior to their involvement with the scheme, had been the target of doorstep calling & enquiries, regular unknown vehicles driving around during different times of the day and sometimes in the evening. Of course, not all of this activity is potentially criminal but when most of your neighbours are within the retirement age band and daily routines are well known – unusual activity in an area can be un-nerving.

As in many other areas across Cumbria, residents do not like to think they are wasting the time of the local police authority by reporting small but unusual incidents, or things that they may have noticed that look out of place. When encouraging folk to take up the scheme I have emphasised that such detail can often assist the police, as it helps to build an additional profile of information around the area and if it is a source of concern to them, then they should report it.

The work for me continues, as I am about to distribute flyers which have been easy to produce from the resources network, to promote the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme across the areas where take up has been slow, or hard to reach. This often occurs in areas that are new in population. It could be that perhaps people in the households are working and do not see, or are too busy to notice the daily activities of their surroundings and neighbours.

I have found that where neighbourhoods are established, or the ages and possibly the working environment is similar, that the neighbourhood is more confident, it is connected and will often alert friends and neighbours to anything out of the ordinary as a matter of course. Families know each other and talk to each other on the phone and via the internet. Once again, the opportunity is there to assist these people in just going that one step further by joining the scheme.

In the future when the uptake of the scheme has improved across the six parishes, I would hope that those parishes via the Parish Clerks, can then begin to share the information with each other, looking to produce their own reports about how the scheme is working between them, the similarities in the reported information and the positive impact it has on the whole community.

It has been a busy time and I am glad that I have become involved with and been able to pass the information on about an organisation that ultimately makes such a difference to the quality of so many lives.

Thank you.

Nicola Clarke