



USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO DEVELOP THE CAPACITY AND DIVERSITY OF THE RUNNYMEDE NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH SCHEME

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None.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Neighbourhood Watch (NW) is a voluntary scheme run with the support of the police in which a particular neighbourhood contributes to reducing crime and its impact by sharing information and support between members and between members and the police. Like many community-based organisations there is an increasing need to consider its sustainability as society evolves. One aspect in particular Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch wanted to consider, and thus the basis of this report, is the extent to which a transition towards using online social media platforms to share and publicise their work would enable development of its membership (towards a younger generation) and longevity so that the organisation would continue to succeed.

What is known about Neighbourhood Watch in terms of previous research is that these schemes can provide benefits to the community they work within, such as enhanced resident feelings of safety, and feeling more looked after and secure. Furthermore, confidence in authorities is fostered through neighbourhood engagement with schemes like Neighbourhood Watch. But there is also a counter to this that schemes such as Neighbourhood Watch which disseminate local crime and disorder information to the local community can enhance perceptions of insecurity, anxiety, and fear through labelling activities as suspicious or unsafe. There are also issues to navigate in terms of exclusion. Not everyone is involved and certain groups living within the community might be demonised or labelled. As a result of technological developments, there has also been a change towards individuals using social media platforms to share information about crime and disorder in their local area. These are not usually developed by Neighbourhood Watch but might include local residence groups and the Police.

Due to declining numbers of residents joining a formalised 'watch' scheme and an awareness of growing social media usage in sharing information about crime and disorder, Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch wanted to understand how it could grow its membership to involve a wider (younger) membership and increase online presence. In doing so they wanted to understand if this would make the schemes more representative and effective. This report presents the first stage of this enquiry through qualitative data collection using interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders of Neighbourhood Watch; Runnymede Borough Council, Surrey Police, Surrey County Council, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey and Surrey Neighbourhood Watch. Key stakeholders were asked about their perspectives on Neighbourhood Watch with reference to their organisation and the local community, as well as how social media might be used to enhance the membership of the scheme.

What is clear through analysis of the data is that the Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch scheme is valued by its stakeholders, particularly in being a 'bridge' between these organisations and the community. This is a way in which organisations can communicate reliable and factual information, which is a pertinent consideration in the context of some of the problems identified with social media and of information accuracy. Organisations also benefit from Neighbourhood Watch being the 'eyes and ears' of the community and thus receive feedback about crime and disorder from the public via these channels.

Where there are aspects for Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch to navigate is how it develops online presence. This was revealed through analysis of the existing use of social media by the scheme. In developing this strategy, the qualitative finding of age considerations must be considered to ensure Neighbourhood Watch moves forward in a way that enables younger generations to join the scheme, perhaps via social media platforms, but also maintains the tradition of the 'watch' with face-to-face meetings and neighbourhood events to promote key messages. This recommendation of a hybrid approach, the third and final qualitative finding, needs careful consideration in terms of how this can be generated and maintained in the long term. Development of social media infrastructure and user agreements will be needed.

This research has demonstrated the value and utility of Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch to its key stakeholders. What is needed to complement and enhance the development of a social media strategy to take Neighbourhood Watch forward is consideration of the views of watch members and non-members to understand how they perceive the value of the scheme. This will facilitate a comprehensive strategy for Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch to develop its profile and ensure it is representative of the local community. This then means the scheme longevity can be realised.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
Section 1. Background to Neighbourhood Watch	6
Section 2. Previous research into Neighbourhood Watch	7
Benefits and challenges of Neighbourhood Watch schemes	8
Neighbourhood Watch and digital technologies	8
Use and effectiveness of online social media platforms	9
Crime prevention apps	9
Section 3. Content and engagement review of existing social media relevant to Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch	10
Section 4. Approach to the study and the questions taken forward in this research	11
Recruitment and participants	11
Approach to data collection	11
Approach to data analysis	12
Section 5. Outcomes of interview and focus group discussions	12
Outcome 1: Neighbourhood Watch as a reliable source and bridge between authorities and communities	12
Outcome 2: Age-related considerations in blending Neighbourhood Watch schemes with social media	13
Outcome 3: Blending digital technology with the traditional in-person schemes	14
Section 6. Summary and recommendations	15
Section 7. Conclusion and future work	17
REFERENCES	18

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes an investigation into the feasibility of using new or existing social media fora to strengthen the work of the Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. The Department of Law and Criminology in the School of Law and Social Sciences at Royal Holloway, University of London was approached to carry out the project by a partnership of Runnymede Borough Council, Surrey Police, Surrey County Council, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey and Surrey Neighbourhood watch convened by Cllr Malcolm Cressey who is a member of Runnymede Borough Council and Surrey Neighbourhood Watch.

Neighbourhood Watch (NW) is a voluntary scheme run with the support of the police in which a neighbourhood contributes to reducing crime and its impact by sharing information and support between members and between members and the police. Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch wanted to involve a wider (younger) membership by operating more online and linking up with other local social media fora whose aims are compatible with those of NW. In doing so they wanted to understand if this would make the NW schemes more representative and more effective.

Section 1 of this report provides brief background information about Neighbourhood Watch nationally and at a local level, relevant to this report. Section 2 explores the findings of a review of the national and international evidence of the issues related to Neighbourhood Watch and the experience of using social media to support related schemes. Section 3 describes a review of social media relevant to Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch. Section 4 sets out the approach to the study and the questions we take forward in the research. Section 5 explores the outcomes of the qualitative interview analysis and presents three key themes. The last two sections draw the report to a close through Section 6 summary and recommendations and Section 7 conclusions and future work.

Section 1. Background to Neighbourhood Watch

Neighbourhood Watch is described as:¹

a grassroots charitable movement, with local schemes run by volunteers throughout England and Wales. We believe in the power of neighbours working together to build safer, vibrant and inclusive communities, help prevent crime and make a positive, sustainable difference in communities.

Neighbourhood Watch is organised regionally in associations. The Surrey Association is further divided at borough level and several groups exist within the borough, each run by a local volunteer co-ordinator. The Neighbourhood Watch page on the Runnymede Borough Council website² states:

Supported by police and the local authority, they help deter crime and antisocial behaviour within communities. It can offer its members the confidence and power to work with police and local authorities to tackle local issues and generate a sense of community spirit.

This provides the following key benefits to members of a Neighbourhood Watch scheme:

- reduction in crime, the opportunities for crime and the fear of crime.
- encourages closer communities where neighbours look out for one another.
- offers reassurance and support, especially for the vulnerable.
- improved awareness to crime prevention measures.
- improved information on local crime and crime patterns.
- opportunity for home insurance discounts.

Section 2. Previous research into Neighbourhood Watch

What started in the USA in the early 1970s as a movement that promoted greater involvement of citizens to help crime reduction, Neighbourhood Watch schemes (NWS) quickly expanded in the UK in the following decade, with the Home Watch programme that emerged in 1982 in Cheshire being one of the first implementations of these projects³. These programmes benefited from great success and involvement from the communities in their early years, with the number of running schemes expanding considerably since the 1980s. In 2000, the British Crime Survey report estimated over a quarter of all households (27%, or over 6 million households) were engaging with a neighbourhood watch scheme in England and Wales⁴. However, as much as this expansion in numbers seemed to represent the first steps towards a crime-free community, international research indicated that nearly half of the properly evaluated schemes were unsuccessful⁵, and there was a significant decline in interest in scheme membership. Traditional versions of Neighbourhood Watch schemes were relying on the involvement of communities and willingness to patrol and report suspicious activities to the local authorities, such as the police.

Based on early literature and past research, it has been argued⁶ that visible surveillance could successfully act as a deterrent for criminal activity. Besides scheduled patrolling by members, these schemes also involved the creation of signs of occupancy, such as mowing lawns, filling up rubbish bins, and removing newspapers/post from house doors when neighbours were known to be away from home⁷. Additionally, schemes implemented projects that promoted education about crime and safety and strengthening relationships with local authorities. The idea was that in so doing, the opportunities for potential criminals to act on would decrease considerably, as would the crime rates.

In the initial implementation of Neighbourhood Watch in the UK, schemes were initiated by the police but were later developed by communities as a way of enhancing safety and feelings of protection; these factors remain the key drivers for participation in NWS. Previous research⁸ has indicated that living in a neighbourhood watch community significantly reduced the crimes that residents of households could potentially suffer, and helped vulnerable groups, such as lone parents, feel safer. Furthermore, successful NWS have been found to bring several benefits to participants, such as increased social control and community spirit⁹, and a significant increase in trust in local authorities and the ability of police to respond to crime¹⁰. However, despite positive results being found when reviewing communities involved in these schemes, research suggested that this success was more often found in communities in which the crime rates were already low¹¹.

Despite the advantages, many communities in the UK faced a substantial decrease in memberships in recent years. For example, in 2000, there were 4.5 million households involved in NWS in the UK, whereas in 2016-2017 there were 2.2 million, reflecting an approximate population percentage reduction from 76% in 1992, to 36% in 2016-2017⁸. Strikingly, the most common reason given by non-Neighbourhood Watch members in a Neighbourhood Watch area for not joining was because no-one had asked them⁸. However, within this broad national picture there are significant regional variations. For example, Neighbourhood Watch membership in Surrey was growing between 2012/13 and 2016/17 after a period of decline⁸. This might be, in part, due to the demographics of Surrey, with a high proportion of homeowners and areas of older adults in an affluent county. Nationally, households with Neighbourhood Watch members are typically older and more affluent than the population as a whole and lived for five years or more in the same social housing or their own detached housing. Demand for joining NWS is greatest amongst older women in households that are a little more affluent than the national average, where the house is unoccupied for significant periods of the day and amongst those who have been disproportionately victims of household crime or who have concerns about crime.

These statistics called for further investigations into the motivations behind participants' engagement, as well as the possible factors that influence the success of these programs, and the challenges they might face.

Benefits and challenges of Neighbourhood Watch schemes

Alongside the advantages of personal safety, community spirit and crime reduction, there are several disadvantages and further issues that naturally emerged with the implementation of NWS. The first relates to increasing community knowledge about criminal activity in their area. On one hand, having direct interaction with authorities and being active in making reports, as well as being made aware of any potential suspicious activities by members of the community, had beneficial effects on citizens, making them feel more secure and 'looked after'. On the other hand, there was experienced an increase in feelings of anxiety and fear, consequent to labelling activities and actions as 'suspicious', 'unsafe' or as 'acts of criminality', activities which otherwise would have passed unnoticed¹¹. This finding, which was replicated across multiple studies, represented one of the biggest challenges that traditional schemes must overcome, as it is directly contradicting the main reason for why participants are believed to want to engage with these projects in the first place - to increase their knowledge and awareness and feeling of personal safety.

A second consideration of NWS is the risk of exclusion and division in a community. Not all citizens will be part of a NWS in their local community, yet the schemes are premised on increasing community spirit, collective accountability and, to some extent, the distancing of strangers/non-community members from the NWS community. In this case, the term 'strangers' is used to define the citizens who live in the same geographical area but are not part of an active NWS in their community. The 'othering' of the non-NWS members creates a psychological distance between the members and non-members and an identification of the non-members with people outside of the local area and who might do harm to the neighbourhood, so suggesting a form of exclusivity of NWS membership¹². This argument has also been highlighted in a 2021 study¹³ on a WhatsApp group chat, created as a NWS in the online environment, in which it was suggested that, as much as these schemes stimulate social cohesion, they risk forming divisions between groups of citizens and create exclusionary practices under the pretext of community safety. Exclusionary practice might not be intentional but in less diverse socio-demographic areas community members who do not identify with the local demographic of a NWS might feel alienated from group membership which could, in turn, have a detrimental impact on sustainability of NWS membership and the efficient running of a scheme¹². This issue requires further exploration, as it directly operates against a key driver for NWS membership, which is to increase in community spirit.

Increasing knowledge, fear or anxiety about criminal activity in a local area and exclusion or division might be factors that contributed to the decrease in NWS membership. Additionally, the perception that NWS members are residents of affluent areas, usually professionals aged 60 or over¹⁰, might have further alienated some community members from joining a local scheme. Furthermore, stakeholders and citizens have adapted practice from face-to-face to online engagement, which presents with unique challenges of community development and cohesion.

Neighbourhood Watch and digital technologies

The growth in the use and applicability of digital technology needs no description, and with the rapid development of the online environment various media platforms started to emerge. Nowadays, individuals not only make use of social computing to engage with a consumer culture, but they make use of available tools to help support and ease their day-to-day activities and routines, as well as contribute to societal problems¹⁴. As part of these daily activities, individuals, depending on demographics, might deal with different levels of crime and suspicious activities, for which they aim to find solutions, and to reduce and combat. With the recent technological advancements, various online applications (apps) have emerged to help support these individuals, and their communities, most of them relying on social networking with other community members¹⁵. Together with these innovative apps, the previous offline communication and surveillance systems of NWS – such as scheduled patrols and face-to-face meetings with authorities - are shifting towards a more online approach of incident reporting and communication on social media platforms. There has been an

increase internationally in the use of digital crime prevention applications but there is little known about the effectiveness of the apps, nor how these are engaged with by users and communities¹⁶.

Use and effectiveness of online social media platforms

There are numerous examples of semi-private groups on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp which support community membership interaction, the reporting of suspicious activity and seeking help when required. These groups are often open to membership by the public and local authorities, which can support flow of information regarding steps taken by an authority to resolve a specific issue and strengthen trust. For example, the Eyewatch project, a Facebook-based community operating in New South Wales since 2011 and in the Australian Capital Territory since 2014, shares the same aims and characteristics as a traditional NWS, with the only difference being that is based online. In line with research on online crime reduction platforms¹⁷, project Eyewatch has proven to be effective only with involvement from the local authorities. This suggests that local authority involvement is a lever for community members to volunteer time to engage with NWS and highlights the importance of community and authority-stakeholder engagement in generating feelings of safety and trust¹⁸.

A 2015 study¹⁹ reviewed 110 Facebook sites, out of which 80 were administered by local authorities, such as the police, and the rest being tailored towards specialist sectors within the organisation, such as youth, gender diversity, or road safety. In the local authority-administered groups, the main method of communication was the daily posts made by police, including pictures and videos that generated dialogue in the community, and engagement that helped build stronger connections and strengthen the feeling of being part of society. The groups that had regular and active police engagement grew memberships at a greater rate than those in which most interactions were between community volunteers. Furthermore, the membership of the groups was more diverse in age than the offline NWS, so captured breadth across communities but might limit engagement of older adults who are less likely to engage with online media with increasing age²⁰.

Crime prevention apps

Online applications to support crime prevention in local communities have developed across cities and countries around the world. These crime prevention apps are broader in scope than the social media platforms and encourage user reporting of crime through smartphone geo-tracking, enabling real-time crime locations and response, and crime avoidance and reduction messaging²¹.

In 2022, a review of crime prevention apps²¹ identified six types, with differing emphases on victim safety, crime prevention and reporting:

1. self-tracking.
2. child-tracking.
3. crime mapping/alert to provide information on alternative, safe routes and locations in real-time.
4. decision aid.
5. crime reporting.
6. educational.

An example of a self-tracking app is Streetlife²², created for women to combat street harassment and sexual assault.

The Safeland app¹⁷ was developed in Sweden to support crime prevention initiatives with a focus on mapping and alerting. Nine months of app trace data were analysed (n=5,210), as well as a survey of the users' experiences (n=72) and the findings suggested that 87% of the participants would be prepared to act immediately if they were to receive a help alert on the app. Furthermore, despite the

app being advertised as a tool for crime prevention, users were engaging more with crime reporting and much less so with preventative actions, such as reporting suspicious activities.

An example of a decision aid app is the MyPlan Safety Decision App, aimed to assist women experiencing domestic abuse and violence. The research evidence base^{23, 24} in the app also has an educational function for victims' friends and families on how to offer better support.

Sensitive topics and experiences of victimisation highlight challenges of the online environment. For some online platforms, users can report incidents based on their own experiences or victimisation, posts which are likely to be accessible to other users who can comment on and distribute the post. A concern here is that the original narrative, through being reposted numerous times, is at risk of getting lost and the story misinterpreted or harmfully reinterpreted by other users²¹. Disclosure of personal victimisation and the potential consequences of doing so are important considerations for app users and are those which directly feed into the intention of the online platforms which support feelings of safety and trust.

When looking at the development of new crime reporting online applications, the opinions of potential users and members of communities could provide valuable information to enhance ease of access, utility and success. One study¹⁰ looked into an in-situ testing of a computer-based system that aimed to improve community relations through the NWS and encourage and support the online reporting of suspicious behaviour or crime. The researchers had close interactions with stakeholders based in the North-West of England, such as NWS coordinators, participants, local police, and system developers, to gain information and opinion on what would motivate individuals to initiate and maintain engagement with such an app. In collaboration with Newcastle University's School of Computing Science and Northumbria University's Department of Psychology, some of the key issues to be considered when looking into a new online app development were identified¹⁰, such as authentication/privacy problems, involvement of stakeholders, psychological/social factors, and legal issues and implications. Moreover, the authors of the study identified, through potential users, further key drivers of and barriers to an internet-based NWS. Preferred features included anonymity, full control of which information to share and when, remote access of information, and looking for a way to facilitate physical interaction. Barriers included automatic engagement with all community members when joining the platform, related to a concern about alienation/exclusion, and a concern about confrontation in an online community with members of the neighbourhood.

Section 3. Content and engagement review of existing social media relevant to Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch

To gain a better understanding of the current social media platforms in place relevant to Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch and the use of digital technology to support the schemes, a social media content and engagement review was conducted. This included the social media pages of Borough police teams, NWS pages of various communities (such as Runnymede NWS, Runnymede Borough Council, and Runnymede Beat).

The main platform used to facilitate the work of the authorities involved with these projects was Facebook. Multiple public, private, and semi-private pages and groups were in place, most of which were already known to the project stakeholders as having active and engaged membership that promoted community spirit, safety, and respect.

The Runnymede Beat (Surrey Police) Facebook page is a police-administered public group that includes daily posts and uploads, used to connect with the community and 22,000 members. In our content review of the group, frequent themes included: updates on ongoing incidents; raising awareness of online frauds, scams and anti-social behaviour hot spots; inviting the public to face-to-

face meetings with Surrey Police using the #MeetTheBeat. Strategies to keep members engaged included: using pictures in all posts; appreciation posts addressed to members of the community for their contribution to investigations; and using colourful emojis to gain the attention of users. The Runnymede Beat Facebook page was highlighted in our discussions with stakeholders (see Section 5) as a good example of using digital technology to keep the general public updated on criminality and antisocial behaviours, and a good way of improving the relationship between a local authority, such as the Police, and the members of their community.

Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch Facebook page was reviewed, at which time there were 714 followers. Most of the posts were re-posted from other pages (such as Runnymede Beat) and there was very limited engagement (comments, shares, likes) with posts. Activity seemed to occur on a weekly, rather than daily, basis.

Runnymede Borough Council Facebook page had 5,800 followers at the time of review. As would be expected, there is less of a focus here on criminal and antisocial behaviour but more on community life, updates and information. Themes included: elections and voting; cost of living crisis; promotion of environmental initiatives and sustainability markets. Despite the number of followers, there was very limited engagement by the members in terms of comments, shares and likes. The comments that were made tended to reflect anger and frustration at the Council.

As is set out further in Section 5 of this report, the challenges of engagement with the content of the Runnymede Borough Council Facebook page were acknowledged by a representative. When discussing whether the Council used social media to engage with the community:

“We don’t use it well in my opinion ... everything has to be in a corporate style ... we’re not in the realm of what you’d expect social media to be, fun and engaging, and almost conversational. We are boring and flat, and if it doesn’t fit the mould, it’s not being put out, which doesn’t serve our community tool. Who would want to engage with something like that?”

Section 4. Approach to the study and the questions taken forward in this research

The study aimed to investigate whether social media can be used to develop the capacity and diversity of the Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch schemes. We used a qualitative research design which involved focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

Recruitment and participants

The participants who were interviewed for this study were stakeholders, representing the Surrey / Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch Scheme, Runnymede Borough Council, Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner and Surrey Police. Except for the police members and the representatives of the Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch Scheme, who were part of two focus groups (five and two participants, respectively), all the other stakeholders were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. Eleven individuals showed interest in the study, with a total of ten participants taking part and providing their responses, all following the same interview schedule, regardless of whether they were part of a focus group, to enhance consistency and accuracy to the data analysis. A participant chose to opt out of the study because they held strongly negative views about social media.

Approach to data collection

The interview and focus group schedule was developed to explore stakeholder perspectives on the national Neighbourhood Watch schemes, including benefits to and disadvantages for communities. The second half of the interview questions focused on participants’ views on a move from traditional

scheme communication and engagement modes to the online environment, including potential benefits and disadvantages for Neighbourhood Watch schemes. Additionally, the interview schedule prompted participants to think about innovative ways in which digital technology could be used to increase the membership of the schemes across communities.

Focus groups enable flexibility during the data collection process and for researchers to gather large amounts of data in short periods of times, making it time and cost-effective²⁵. In our focus groups, participants had the opportunity to draw on each other ideas and build stronger and more tangible arguments. Individual, semi-structured interviews allowed a more in-depth exploration of ideas and provided a safe and confidential space for participants to freely express their opinions without risk of conformity to the ideas of other participants²⁶, as can be a risk in focus groups but which was mitigated through group facilitation.

The focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded before being transcribed verbatim whilst preserving anonymity of participants.

Approach to data analysis

The focus group and interview transcripts were analysed using an established technique for textual data called thematic analysis, which captures explicit and implicit ideas and meanings. Six steps for thematic analysis were followed²⁷. This involved first the repeated listening of the recordings, while reading the transcripts and making notes. In the next step, codes were generated and meaningful ideas as patterns, noticeable across all transcripts, were further organized into themes, to organise the data analysis with reference to the research aim.

Section 5. Outcomes of interview and focus group discussions

Three key themes emerged:

1. Neighbourhood Watch as a tool to communicate factual and reliable information, seen as a “bridge” between the authorities and the general public, and “the eyes and ears” for the authorities in the community. According to the findings, one of the most important points to get across to communities was raising awareness of crimes and scams.
2. Age-related considerations in blending Neighbourhood Watch schemes with social media, specifically how social media serves as both an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time depending on age (e.g. young or elderly members).
3. Blending digital technology with the traditional in-person schemes.

Outcome 1: Neighbourhood Watch as a reliable source and bridge between authorities and communities

Neighbourhood Watch schemes were considered by participants to be important contexts for conveying reliable and valid information to the general public. Participants also valued NWS as a “bridge” between different organisations/authorities, such as Runnymede Borough Council, Surrey Police and the wider community. In so doing, participants thought that NWS brought authorities and the general public together and helped to strengthen the community relationships.

By way of illustration, a participant from the Surrey Police and Crime Commissioner’s Office (Participant 1) commented:

“It’s about ... getting information out to the broad members of the public ... It’s about giving people advice, prevention messages ... updates on incidents that are ... accurately and factually correct, so they’re not getting it from other sources ... They provide that messaging service, which is backed by

the police, and our office and other partners ... people can trust that ... it comes from a source, and it's not like Chinese whispers or word of mouth ... They are providing that ... genuine ... communication."

The bridging role of NWS was also reflected by volunteers, one of whom said that Neighbourhood Watch acts as "glue between the police and the people ... the police are not good at communicating" (Participant 4, Surrey Neighbourhood Watch). Another commented that "to the police, we often feedback concerns and perceptions ... We act as a conduit, and it is recognized by the Surrey Police that we do that, and I sometimes get communications from Surrey Police direct to say, "Please can you post this out to your people?" (Participant 3, Surrey Neighbourhood Watch). A participant from Surrey Police also spoke about the role of NWS as "keeping communities safe" through being "our eyes and ears of the community ... they'll look at what kind of crimes are going on and they'll look at witness appeals ... they're really valuable" (Focus Group 2).

A participant from Runnymede Borough Council emphasised the importance of NWS in directing members to appropriate sources of support and crime reporting processes, emphasising the role of NWS as providing reliable information:

"Giving the information to help them get it to the right place first time ... you take anti-social behaviour, for example, it spans multiple different departments depending on the nature of the report. So ... it would be to try and provide almost like a single point of contact ... They could come in through one front door and then let us push it out to the other departments ... the Council struggles to get information out there, so if we can look to engage Neighbourhood Watch as potentially furthering the spread of that information, that would be really useful" (Participant 2).

There was also reference to understanding specific issues within the local community and targeting relevant information through the NWS. For example, "in Surrey, because we are particularly targeted by fraud and cybercrime ... one of the biggest defences against that is to make sure people are aware of what the risks are" (Participant 3, Surrey Neighbourhood Watch). Furthermore, the role of NWS was seen as providing "preventative messages ... making sure people are aware about how to protect themselves online or ... doorstep crime ... it's really important that those networks are used to ... remind people ... how to stay safe generally" (Participant 1, Surrey PCC Office). Messaging would include "little things like ... people are aware of the fact that they should make sure their windows are closed when they go out and make sure that the shed is locked up. All those little things" (Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch participant in Focus Group 1).

Outcome 2: Age-related considerations in blending Neighbourhood Watch schemes with social media

Increasing diversity of age membership of NWS provoked discussion about the relative merits and disadvantages of both traditional NWS approaches and social media platforms. Concerns reflected by participants were of the limits to older adult access to digital technologies, including social media, yet noting that it was difficult to increase membership to younger people through the traditional NWS. The question of whether NWS were the most effective fora to reach younger people was also raised by participants.

There was a sense of commitment by participants to the success of Neighbourhood Watch because there were clear benefits of NWS to communities. For success to be realised, it was considered important to ensure that NWS "is connected with as many different people as it can from different parts of life ... we know that our young, working cohort population within the community equally want that information, but accessing it at different times" (Participant 1, Surrey PCC Office). Additionally, having a critical mass of a user base "that we can get that information out to, and it's the diversity within that user base as well" (Surrey Police participant, Focus Group 2).

Participants spoke about the typical demographic of NWS and issues relating to sustainability if younger people were not engaged in the membership. For example, a member of Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch (Focus Group 1) commented that “the perception ... of those ... watches is they're run by older generations. And the problem ... is that those watches are not sustainable over the long term because they don't have backup and so forth. The ones which we've noticed where you have social media, they're growing and they are maintained by younger people ... the normal traditional type of watch is not growing ... they're tending to shrink and fall by the wayside”. A member of Surrey Neighbourhood Watch added that “the typical Neighbourhood Watch coordinators are too old ... The great thing about WhatsApp is that 80-year-olds use it. They won't go near Facebook” (Participant 3). There was acknowledgement that leadership of NWS was lost when older members in coordinating roles retired but there was an absence of younger membership to modernise a watch and to take forward sustainable coordination and leadership.

The absence of younger members was recognised by other stakeholders: “Engaging with that younger part of the communities is probably quite hard. When we're going to meetings, quite a lot of their [NWS] attendees are of the older residents' side ... getting that next kind of group through, I imagine, is always a bit of pressure on the watch itself” (Participant 1, Surrey PCC Office).

Participants discussed whether Neighbourhood Watch was the forum through which younger people would engage. For example, “we find it reasonably difficult ... to get to a younger audience. They're one of our more challenging audiences to engage with. So, do we just recognise that we're never going to achieve that through Neighbourhood Watch? Or are we able to change that in some way?” (Surrey Police participant, Focus Group 2). There was recognition that the national scheme had undergone a rebrand but questions as to whether that was fit for purpose in encouraging a more diverse age membership: “I question whether or not the current brand identity of Neighbourhood Watch is such that actually attracts a younger audience in order to provide some of that longevity and sustainability” (Surrey Police participant, Focus Group 2). There was also acknowledgement that “if we want to put our message that might target more of our youth audience, Neighbourhood Watch wouldn't really be the place to go to for that” (Surrey Police participant, Focus Group 2).

Outcome 3: Blending digital technology with the traditional in-person schemes

This theme reflects participant views on the need to find a common ground for the NWS membership – blending digital and in-person approaches - to ensure the continuation of the schemes. Considerations included how to manage a safe online environment and in the context of the prevalence of online fraud and scams within Surrey, the utility of an online NWS presence given the extent of other community-led social media initiatives, developing a critical mass of members, and respecting the ethos of NWS as a mechanism to promote a sense of community.

There was acknowledgement of the advantages of in-person meets for Neighbourhood Watch, but also the difficulties of when this approach felt too formalised: “It's always been about involvement ... everybody went along to a meeting of residents and they are all up for it. And then when it came down to looking for volunteers, to actually put a bit more effort into the whole process, the room emptied quite quickly” (Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch participant, Focus Group 1). This suggests that residents want to access information but might not be able or willing to commit to taking part in Neighbourhood Watches. These community members might therefore be more inclined to join online social networks rather than in-person watches.

The benefits to in-person watches reflected an emphasis on community building and cohesion but less so on direct crime prevention. For example, “I don't think we should lose the neighbourhood watch coordinators in their communities because I think they're really important in building that kind of face-to-face. And quite often we have residents that are vulnerable and need help that you wouldn't necessarily see if you weren't going out and doing your neighbourhood watching” (Participant 1, Surrey PCC Office). In-person presence was also thought to be important to the

development of safety and trust in the community in a way that an online presence would not succeed: "I think it shows a way of being able to identify and connect on a more personal level, rather than being a pseudonym on a computer keyboard. I think it's about those connections. So, I think that's a positive there in terms of being able to build close relationships with some key individuals who are like minded" (Surrey Police participant, Focus Group 2).

Concerns were expressed about moving to a solely online approach, in terms of redundancy of NWS. For example, "I feel that the ship has already sailed a little bit in terms of setting up digital watch groups. I don't think that it's necessarily too late, but I don't think that Neighbourhood Watch, if they were to set up a watch scheme on Facebook or another digital platform, for example ... I don't know that I would choose to join that over a [similar function] group already that's in establishment ... which has got a much larger uptake of community engagement already within it" (Surrey Police participant, Focus Group 2).

Concerns were also raised about the vulnerability of older adults in an online environment and balancing this with the aims of NWS: "older people ... are the main victims of fraud ... and they are more likely to use email than social media. Social media is very generation dependent ... The long-term future for Neighbourhood Watch is probably going to be social media, but at the moment there is plenty of room for the types of watches that I run, the email-based ones ... I've merged up my emails with a whole other 'What's on' stuff, so it's a very valuable service on which I'm telling people what events are taking place and so on, so neighbours are telling other people too" (Participant 3, Surrey Neighbourhood Watch). Furthermore, there were concerns about the balance of information sharing in an online platform: "if you're having a bad day, you can read it as a little bit snippy as opposed to friendly ... when we're looking at live incidences that are being investigated, we necessarily can't give much detail. And of course, everybody wants detail, completely understandable. I'd want the details if it was in my area of things that were going on. And it's almost like we're giving with one hand, but taking away with five, you know, then feels like we are picking and choosing what we tell them" (Participant 2, Runnymede Borough Council).

A blended online and face-to-face approach was thought to be a useful solution: "I think there's ... benefits of having online as well as that physical. But to have that online presence reaches a whole different demographic, I think. I think you might find you can increase your volunteer base by offering something that's slightly different. So, you're not asking people to go and knock on doors and ... put leaflets through the door. You're asking people to be that online presence, which might be more attractive to some people" (Participant 1, Surrey PCC Office).

There was also the suggestion of trying to join up schemes into larger ones to foster more of a community spirit with a hybrid approach of watches being in person but also having an online presence:

"I've tried to ... get this idea of combining small watches together to create bigger watches and to get them to be community based. And with some success I've done that, but you'll never get the 80-year-old guy stepping up to takeover maybe four or five other streets ... So, the improvement for me is to ... and this is where social media comes in, of course, is to widen that" (Participant 4, Surrey Neighbourhood Watch).

Section 6. Summary and recommendations

The feasibility and potential of using social media to develop the capacity and diversity of Neighbourhood Watch was reviewed. Following a content review of existing social media and analysis of interview and focus group transcripts, the main outcomes reflect those found in previous

research on Neighbourhood Watch and related schemes (as set out in Section 2 of this report), but with recommendations for further research or consideration in developing Runnymede NWS.

The most prominent theme was Neighbourhood Watch as a reliable source of information and bridge between authorities and communities. This highlighted that having a community-based organisation such as Neighbourhood Watch bringing awareness of crime hot-spots, internet scams, and potential suspicious activities to the general public has a positive impact, increasing a sense of personal safety to residents. In this study, and unlike previous research, there was no clear theme relating to crime awareness increasing fear, and this might be because members of the public were not interviewed. Further research, including local residents, might pick up on this information-sharing issue of balancing safety and fear to further inform development of NWS.

An additional benefit of NWS was the mechanism for this to be “the eyes and ears” of the local authorities in communities, facilitated through the traditional NWS members’ physical patrol of communities and reporting suspicious activities and behaviours directly to the local authorities. This relationship seemed to be of particular benefit to the police and highlighted the importance of stakeholder involvement in the development of digital technology to support NWS.

The main challenge of NWS identified in this study was of scheme membership, engagement and sustainability. The content review of Runnymede Police and Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch Scheme social media pages identified differing approaches to engaging communities. Regular activity and originality seem to be important to community engagement. For example, the Runnymede NWS official Facebook page had little to no original content, shared posts mainly from Surrey Police and did so infrequently (e.g. weekly). Furthermore, there was an absence of engagement with members that would have promoted a sense of community spirit, in line with the NWS ethos. This leads to the questions of (1) what the identity of Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch would or could be if developed and established online, and (2) how an active social media or other online presence could be resourced and sustained.

In this study, there was no consensus on what a blended NWS should look like to best meet the needs of community members and stakeholders whilst maintaining the ethos of Neighbourhood Watch. One of the biggest concerns was how an online presence might negatively impact engagement of different age groups. As reflected in the literature review and the findings of this study, the over-representation of older adults in NWS across the UK is of concern, in terms of sustainability of watches and the scheme, and the risk of losing projects currently in place due to lack of engagement by younger residents and, therefore, continuity. An online presence could go some way to resolving this issue but risk losing engagement by older adults.

An additional consideration is to the formalisation of membership through social media platforms. Community members might want to gain access to reliable information but not become a member of Neighbourhood Watch or share information.

What is clear is that a blended approach to Neighbourhood Watch, combining traditional face-to-face meetings and online ‘watch’ activities, would likely best support membership and engagement across a diverse age range. It is envisaged that this would take the form of communicating to neighbours about general crime deterrent measures such as locking windows and outbuildings, alongside development of social media platforms to disseminate information more widely and allow residents who do not want to be part of a formalised ‘watch’ to hear and learn about crime prevention information relevant to their local area and from a reliable source. How to ensure that a blended approach is inclusive (and not alienating) for community members (as identified in previous research) and promotes a community spirit requires consideration through further research.

Section 7. Conclusion and future work

Overall, the research supports the development and integration of digital technologies in the work of Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch. Doing so might increase the membership and effectiveness of the scheme, whilst also promoting the activities of local authorities and enhancing community relationships. More investigation would be needed to explore how a blended approach could widen the demographic characteristics of those involved in NWS and how any risks to membership as a consequence of the introduction of digital technology could be mitigated.

The second phase of this project will take forward an understanding of these points and in collaboration with local residents. The project will also consider the feasibility of the development of a new social media platform or app to support the work of Neighbourhood Watch. This is not solely - or mainly - a technical question. Any new forum or app would need to:

- a) Meet the needs of the local residents and relevant stakeholders. We need to understand more about what these are.
- b) Be engaging and meaningful to the local residents/community. We need to understand more about what this would look like.
- c) Be updated regularly so the content is relevant and topical. We would need to understand the capacity of the Runnymede NWS to manage these requirements.
- d) Be available for different operating systems (Apple and Android).
- e) Ensure content meets ethical, legal and regulatory requirements such as General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).
- f) Have clear aims and a delivery and implementation strategy.

We will continue to work with Runnymede Neighbourhood Watch and relevant stakeholders to address these points and develop an understanding of how a blended approach could support the work of the scheme.

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