POWER to the PEOPLE

When anti-social behaviour made a community turn on its police force, one officer decided the answer was a DIY policing scheme – and Street Watch was born. Mark Priswell finds out how the scheme works.

The default position for many communities plagued by anti-social behaviour is to turn to their police force and demand more bobbies on the beat.

For Ch Insp Phil Kedge, district commander for Hampshire Constabulary’s East Hampshire division, this mantra was all too familiar. But rather than get involved in another debate with residents about resources, he decided to take a different approach.

Ch Insp Kedge tells Police Review: ‘I challenged the public to stop moaning at us and to work with us instead, to empower East Hampshire as a district and take policing to a new level.’

In local radio and newspaper interviews in May 2007, he called on people to form citizen patrols to walk their own streets – in short, to do something for themselves.

Ch Insp Kedge says: ‘I could understand their frustrations but there was a limit to what we could do to meet their expectations. The embedded position from the public was to call for more police which is a really narrow view and the reality was that the force was unlikely to get any more [resources] in the foreseeable future.’

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the public’s initial reaction was far from positive.

Ch Insp Kedge says: ‘There was a lot of hostility. People were saying it was just an excuse for having no more police, that it was too dangerous, that they pay their taxes so why should they walk their own streets?’

Do it yourself

But when he offered to set up and manage the scheme, as well as pound the streets himself in his own time, he said the barriers began to come down. Among those who answered the call were residents of Four Marks, a leafy village with 4,000 residents near Alton, where Ch Insp Kedge lives.

Street Watch was born and there are now three active schemes with more on the way.

Members, who have no police powers, are asked to commit at least two hours a month to patrols, which are always undertaken in pairs, although many go out every week for an hour or so.

They wear high-visibility jackets, carry mobile phones and are vetted by the force. Some volunteers also carry personal attack alarms. A website has been created so they can communicate with other members and share information on trouble spots.

They must also register the date, time and location of their patrols, which they can undertake whenever they want, online before going out so police officers know where they are.

Members also have personal accident and injury insurance as well as public liability cover, which costs the force £1,200 a year for the whole district. The force hopes private sponsorship will be secured in the future to pay for this.

Each jacket costs £6 and, with administration costs factored in, a group costs between £100 and £150 to set up.

Members always undertake their first patrol with a police officer or experienced member of the group. They also talk through the various scenarios they may face with officers before heading out for the first time and are given a set of operational guidelines about conduct.

These stress the need to be non-confrontational at all times, to act within the law, to
always be polite and courteous and to patrol on foot only, never in a vehicle. The group also has meetings every six weeks with the local beat officer.

**Overcoming fear**

Ch Insp Kedge knew villagers were unhappy with the police service’s response to the perennial problem of youngsters making a nuisance of themselves.

Gangs of hooded youths would drink, swear, make noise, take drugs, fight and intimidate locals as well as commit acts of vandalism. Some local people were afraid to go out at night while fear stopped others from talking to the youngsters.

Ch Insp Kedge says: ‘One of the challenges for communities and the police service is not just tackling crime – we are very proficient at that and our detection rate is the highest of any mainland district in Hampshire Constabulary – it is the disproportionate fear of crime which underpins our communities.

‘It causes people to retreat into their own homes. They give up ownership of their open spaces where anti-social behaviour and low-level disorder thrives and people become over-reliant on the police service.

‘We do our best but we may not be able to provide that level of service and response rate that people expect. There is a gap between what people expect of police officers and what we can deliver. The concept was to try and close that gap and increase confidence in the police – to empower the community to be a partner with us and improve community cohesion.’

That concept led to Four Marks launching its first patrol in April 2008. It now has 19 unpaid volunteers aged 30 to 65.

Street Watch members say they are proud to don fluorescent jackets and patrol their streets – just do not call them vigilantes.

Sonia Brown, chairman of the Four Marks group, says: ‘I hate that word. Some people have classed us as a vigilante group but they do not understand. It makes it sound like we are going out looking for trouble, that we are not doing anything good – but it is about caring about where you live, making it safer.’

Celia Cheadle, 64, a semi-retired business administrator, says: ‘People have got used to seeing us now and we have got to know their names. We try and talk to people rather than dictate to them, which gets their hackles up and welfare. The same applies to rowdy groups of teenagers – they will not be ordered to move away or admonished, rather asked if they will keep the noise down.

Members also act as a link between the community and Hampshire Constabulary, passing information and potential intelligence to officers who, in turn, can use them as contacts. The volunteers will also pick up rubbish and chalk.

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**National debate**

Groups also operate in the village of Holybourne and Liphook, a small town, while a scheme on the Cranford Estate, Petersfield, is about to go live. All are in East Hampshire.

Street patrols are also to be implemented in the next three to six months in the larger, more challenging areas of Basingstoke, Aldershot, Farnborough and Hart, which are all in other districts of Hampshire.

Ch Insp Kedge has written to the Home Office with details of the project, which now has 65 active members but is expected to hit 100 with new schemes starting, as well as ACPO and the National Policing Improvement Agency.

He says: ‘Street Watch has gone to the point where I believe that we have got a concept that is documented, viable and offers long-term solutions to communities.’

‘I believe this could work in inner city, deprived areas, as long as it is with police guidance. If you say you cannot do it here or there, you are telling the community that they can never improve their own environment – if we get to that stage it would be very sad indeed.’

For more details see www.street-watch.org.uk