

NEIGH- BOURHOOD WATCH

Sir Kenneth Newman completed five years as Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis in July 1989; we asked him to reflect on the introduction of Neighbourhood Watch.

My decision to introduce Neighbourhood Watch in the Metropolis was prompted by a combination of logic and necessity. On taking command of Metropolitan Police in 1982, I took stock of my resources and began an assessment of their adequacy and effectiveness for achieving the purpose for which the Force had been established.

On the face of it the inventory looked pretty good: 43,000 personnel, 26,500 police and 16,500 civil staff which included a cavalry of over 200 horses, a fleet of 23 Thames launches, a little airforce of 3 helicopters and a budget at that time of about 850 million (it was later 1 billion).

But how successful was the deployment of all these resources in achieving the mission of the organisation? The stated mission was still the one laid down by Rowan and Mayne (the first two Commissioners): to prevent and detect crime, to protect life and property and to preserve the Queen's Peace. Rowan and Mayne had posited only one, rather strict, performance measure: 'the test of the efficiency of the force in achieving these objectives', they said, 'will be the absence of crime.'

Well, by that performance measure, the Force would have to be found wanting. At the time I took office, the recorded crime figures for the Metropolis had almost doubled since 1972, trebled since 1962 and were six times the level of 1952. But was the performance measure stipulated by Rowan and Mayne realistic? In my opinion it was not. Levels of reported crime are not simply an indicator of police performance, but an indicator of social order in general. They reflect as much on the willingness of the public to become involved in crime prevention as they do on the success or failure of the police.

I was quite clear about three things. First, ministers and senior civil servants had stated they were not convinced that additional resources for the police would reduce crime. Research provided some justification for their doubt. Secondly, if police resources were to remain virtually static in the face of rising crime and disorder, the police could no longer sustain the fiction that they could, by themselves, perform to an acceptable level all the functions the public expected of them; investigating each crime thoroughly, manning all traffic accident spots and discharging all the administrative tasks imposed by statute. Thirdly, our best hope for containing crime was to organise a more structured partnership between the police and the public to promote the prevention of crime and to reduce opportunities for its commission.

Of course there is nothing new about the police invoking the assistance of the public to combat crime, but in the past it has been largely a matter of mere exhortation. In 1982 we set out to create pervasive organisations within which the public would be able to work with the police in a purposeful partnership. The generic concept, then, was partnership. Within that concept fell such schemes as consultative committees, victim support schemes, crime prevention panels, estate policing projects and, of course, Neighbourhood Watch.

After a preliminary study of the operation of Neighbourhood Watch in the USA, we launched a Watch scheme in London in 1983. It grew at a phenomenal rate. By the time I retired in 1987, there were some 7000 Neighbourhood Watch schemes embracing about 1.25 million people.

Evaluating the impact of Neighbourhood Watch is a difficult exercise. One research project came up with some pessimistic conclusions, but as it was based on a study of only two schemes out of 7,000, it should be treated with caution. It is possible to point to particular Watch schemes which have led directly to police arrests for burglary. Others show significant reductions in the levels of reported burglary. The collective impact of all Watch schemes is, however, harder to assess. Ironically, an increase in the level of reported

burglaries within the area of a Watch scheme would not necessarily indicate failure as it could, instead, point to a greater willingness to report burglaries which, before the Watch scheme, might have gone unreported. The British Crime Survey of 1984 showed that some 30% of burglaries were not reported.

Although caution is necessary in assessing Watch schemes by crime statistics alone, one can be more positive about some qualitative aspects of the schemes. Most important is the growing commitment of Watch members to active participation in projects to improve the quality of life in their neighbourhoods. There are fundraising activities for local charities, social events involving neighbours who may previously have been strangers to one another and self help activities such as improving home security.

Neighbourhood Watch is likely to continue to grow in significance. Local Watch schemes are communicating with one another. In London, a regional forum for Watch schemes has been established and attempts are being made to establish a national forum. Local groups are already exerting pressure on Councils to eradicate environmental factors which encourage crime, such as poor street lighting and crosswalks between tower blocks. Ultimately national lobbying power might be developed.

The Watch concept has not remained static. It now embraces not just residential homes, but also places of work and recreation. There is now 'Business Watch', 'Pub Watch', 'Hospital Watch', 'Cab Watch' and the 'Crime Stoppers' initiative.

We should not think of Neighbourhood Watch as an isolated initiative. It should be assessed in the more general context of the growing co-operation and partnership between citizens, police, central and local government, and voluntary and statutory social agencies in the objective of preventing crime. Equally importantly, the 'Watch' concept should be seen as just one of many ways of enabling the public to make a reality of the principle that all citizens have a responsibility to help in promoting an orderly society.