

Rural Safety Initiative



Summary

The Rural Safety Initiative has been developed by West Mercia Constabulary in consultation with rural communities. It embodies a comprehensive guide to risk management, and engages rural communities, utilising their help and assistance to problem solve their own issues at a local parish level.

To ensure that the development of the Initiative was soundly based on research, Dr Richard Yarwood of the University of Plymouth, was commissioned to conduct research into the 'Fear of Crime and Perceptions of Policing in Rural Areas of West Mercia Constabulary. The Government Office for the West Midlands and the Countryside Agency contributed to funding this research.

Dr Yarwood utilised a questionnaire, which was distributed to all parish councils in West Mercia Constabulary, the results of which were then analysed. This showed overwhelmingly that quality of life issues were the major concerns of the rural population. Crime rated '10th' in the listings.

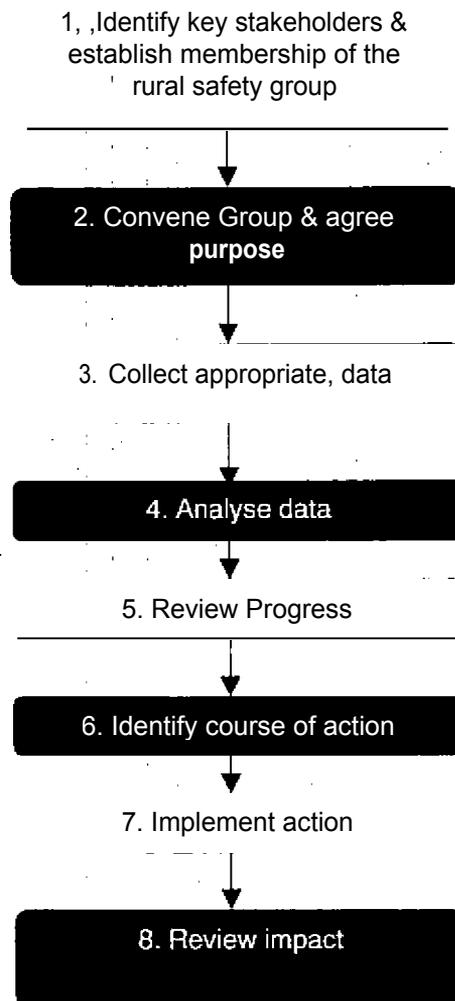
Four rural Parishes were then selected to pilot the Rural Safety Initiative and in depth surveys were undertaken with the residents of these pilot parishes to identify local concerns. Key stakeholders formed Rural Safety Groups, and then collected data to ascertain the real or perceived nature of these concerns. These Rural Safety Groups then applied problem solving techniques to those local issues that had actually been verified as problematic, and this enabled matters to be addressed. The results generally showed that these quality of life issues could be dealt with more effectively by a local group who needed minimal police support.

Once selected the key stakeholders, who will form the Rural Safety Group, together with Police Beat Managers attend a comprehensive three hour training course, during which they will learn of the philosophy which underpins the Rural Safety Initiative.

They also receive information on some underlying crime reduction theories and how to cascade this knowledge to other stakeholders by using the workshop training activities, which are included in the step by step resource pack that accompanies the initiative.

The object. of the training course is to enthuse the stakeholders and give them the confidence to work through the problem solving model on which the initiative is based.

Rural Safety Group Problem Solving Model



The above process will be **cyclical** rather than linear and in practice it is possible to return to different points on the chart as and when appropriate.

Accreditation

Where a Rural Safety Group has worked through the problem solving stages and recorded their efforts, then the Rural Safety Initiative offers them accreditation in the form of a Rural Safety Initiative certificate.

The Rural Safety Initiative (RSI)

The Rural Safety Initiative grew out of the Rural Policing Strategy, which forms a chapter in West Mercia's Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy document.

The political fallout following the conviction of the Norfolk farmer Tony Martin for murder on the 19th April 2000 brought to a head a growing perception among rural communities that the police had effectively abandoned them. A report from the National Farmers' Union pointed out that:

'fear of crime, combined with the effects of the farm income crises and other problems affecting life in the countryside, is leading to serious depression in many people and even to a **siege mentality in a minority.**'

The report goes on to say that criminals using motorway networks were seeking "**easy pickings**" in the countryside. Crime in the countryside had become a major political issue as evidenced by the government White Paper and the Countryside Agency report 'The State of the Countryside 2000'.

The aim of the RSI

The aim of the RSI is to target the 80% of nuisance/quality of life calls that are made to our Police control rooms, especially the repeat element of these calls to the same location. It is not primarily to reduce crime. since the initiative is designed to allow the rural community, themselves to address local problems. This initiative, has proved effective and reduces demand on scarce police resources that can then target their activities in a proactive, intelligence-led way on the 20% of calls we receive which relate to crime.

With this in mind, as a large, predominantly rural Police area, a research project was undertaken which sought to investigate these rural fears/ concerns and then to ascertain whether they were real or perceived. Once the actual fears/ concerns were established then appropriate action could seek to address the problems.

Four sites were selected to conduct a trial. These sites were challenging in terms of representing what many people would regard as rural idylls i.e. picturesque 'black and white' villages with little crime and little, if any, social deprivation. The sites chosen were:

Weobley village, [Kington Section, Herefordshire]

Wigmore village, [Kington Section, Herefordshire]

Great Witley, [Tenbury Section, Worcestershire]

Clifton on Teme. [Tenbury Section, Worcestershire].

West Mercia Constabulary contracted Dr Richard Yarwood of the University of Plymouth to carry out research into fear of crime in rural areas. The Government Office for the

West Midlands and the Countryside Agency gave funding for this research. It was logical to tie-in Richard Yarwood's research' with the Rural Safety Initiative as we would avoid unnecessary duplication. Firstly, Dr Yarwood contacted all Parish Councils within the Force area to ascertain, inter alia,

The extent to which crime was seen as a problem in rural areas of West Mercia

The types of crime and',disorder and safety issues that were perceived to be problematic in these areas.

Public satisfaction with policing in rural areas.

The results of this survey were analysed by Dr Yarwood and surprisingly show that the issue of rural crime" amounts to a 'moral panic', in terms of perceptions versus reality.

Results of the survey;

- Speeding traffic [cited by 91% of the Parishes]
- Lack of activities for youngsters[82%]
- Lack of affordable housing [72%]
- Lack of local services
- Lack of transport

Note, crime was ranked 1 Qth down the list.

Quality of life 'nuisance` issues predominated and this is something that we can impact on given the expertise in Force regarding Beat Management.

Rural Safety Groups (RSG)

The basic building block for the Rural Safety Initiative is the Parish. This was chosen because of the following reasons:

- The RSI training strongly stresses the need to have a Parish Councillor 'on board' to alleviate problems regarding local politics/conflicting agendas.
- Parish Councils are covered by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.
- Parish Councils are able to raise funds through the parish precept.
- They have an existing structure with links to higher tiers of local government.
- They have access' to premises and so can facilitate meetings.

However, the RSG is not solely based on a Parish Council and identifying key stakeholders is essential to forming a representative RSG for each parish.

Identifying the right key players who would form the individual groups was essential, and to this end, so was an experienced Police Beat Manager with local knowledge. The Beat Manager would select local volunteers [including a parish councillor] and ask for their help in forming a Rural Safety Group. The group members should all be stakeholders in the local community and be as broadly representative as possible.

The Process for the Police Beat Manager.

Comprehensive training is given to the Police Beat Managers involving such elements as problem solving, the designed environment, local government decision making, Intelligence Led Policing, the role of a Divisional Analyst, etc., Officers attending the training would: .

- Familiarise themselves with the requirements of setting up and running the RSG
- Will examine the training activities designed to support the Rural Safety Initiative.
- Will gain an understanding, of the RSI certification process
- Understand crime reduction theories and general principles that are relevant to the RS1
- Will explore how to maintain an acceptable balance between functionality, security and accountability

What are some of the Rural Safety Groups achievements to date?

Weobley RSG

The problems were identified by residents in the village survey:

1. **Problem :Young persons hanging around**
2. **Solution :** Rural Safety Group contacted the Young Farmers organisation and has improved facilities available to the local youth club so that more youngsters attend and spend less time hanging around the village.
 - i. **Problem : Teenagers buying drinks from off-licence leading to noise/nuisance problem in the village. [older youths buying for younger ones]**
 2. **Solution :** RSG approached local store and owner agreed not to sell alcohol on Fridays [youth club nights] to youngsters. This has led to a marked improvement.
- 1 **Problem : Traffic problems in the ' village.** Because Weobley has narrow streets, parked vehicles can cause major problems. This has led to the local bus company threatening to withdraw services because buses could not negotiate narrow streets due to parked vehicles.
2. **Solution :** RSG arranged for new signs to be erected informing people of where parking was available. Beat Manager warned offenders of consequences of illegal parking. Traffic Warden from Hereford contacted to carry out visits to the village.. RSG arranged for a pedestrian count to be carried out to evidence need for a pedestrian crossing in the village.

1. **Problem : Rubbish/litter causing village to look scruffy and unkempt.**
 2. **Solution :** Litter pick organised by the RSG i.e. Tidy Village Mornings. Residents are supplied with gloves and black bags and pick up all visible litter. Prizes are awarded for the most litter/cans collected. Results immediately apparent.
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1. **Problem: Bus shelter-youths congregating there at night, urinating, spraying graffiti etc.,**
 2. **Solution :** local resident [elderly lady] hoses-down the bus shelter each night. Local youths no longer congregate there.
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1. **Problem: Traffic Speeding through village- residents concerned for safety of school children.**
 2. **Solution :** problem mainly confined to people travelling to light industrial estate on their way to work each morning. Local officers have been trained to use hand-held radar and have targeted speeding vehicles. RSG want to take part in this in the future to advise people of the dangers.
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1. **Problem: vandalism of the children's' play area by the village hall on the outskirts of the village.**
 2. **Solution :** RSG had the 12-ft hedge cut lower, this allowed a view into the play area from the road. With natural surveillance increased, vandalism has been reduced.
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1. **Problem : lights outside the village hall continually being smashed.**
 2. **Solution :** village hall committee sought higher specification lights with strong mesh cover to protect the bulb.
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1. **Problem : Greenhouse belonging to elderly resident opposite high school continually getting glass smashed.**
 2. **Solution :** This was caused by children using rubble from the demolition of the old primary school as ammunition. Contractors contacted by group and rubble removed - no more glass has been broken.
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1. **Problem : Children climbing into recycling containers and throwing rubbish out leading to litter problems in the village, with added danger of a child being trapped in the containers**
 2. **Solution :** RSG contacted Hereford Council and the containers have been removed until a more suitable design can be installed.
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1. **Problem : Dog mess in village.**
 2. **Solution :** 'po^P per scooper' bins are being installed in the village to cut down on mess as an initial action. Further initiatives will be considered.

All the above has been achieved by the Rural Safety Group working through the problem solving process in their packs.

This has been achieved in spite of the fact that the Beat Managers assigned to this RSG have been seconded into a Major Incident Room for a period of nearly six months, proving that the RSI is low-maintenance in terms of police involvement once the initial training has been delivered.

Wigmore.

Although Wigmore has half the population of Weobley [under 500], they too have achieved success through their own efforts. The survey revealed that speeding traffic, parking and congestion and young people 'hanging around' were the biggest concerns for residents.

1. **Problem : Youths hanging around**
2. **Solution :** the RSG first set about attracting funding for improvements. They have now been able to add extra facilities in the Mortimer Leisure Centre such as a pool table, table tennis etc., and also a 'Kids Zone' after school club for the younger children. They have also set up a holiday club with a full summer programme. This has resulted in a marked improvement in the village with less children on the streets.

1. **Problem : Traffic congestion speeding traffic**
2. **Solution :** worst offenders [local residents] have been approached by the police and given suitable advice and this, according to local officers has led to a marked improvement, together with the use of a hand-held speed detection device to reduce speeding through the village.

1. **Problem : lack of pavements/pot holes in the road**
2. **Solution :** RSG has approached Council who have agreed to carry out repairs/ resurface roads etc.,

Great Witley

Great Witley has an active RSG and good support from the local community [at a recent evening presentation 110 attended the village hall].

1. **Problem : overgrown hedges blocking traffic signs and leading to poor visibility at junctions.**
2. **Solution** RSG contacted Council all hedges now trimmed back, verges cut, signs unobscured.

1. **Problem : speeding vehicles through village**
2. **Solution:** Local officers have carried out regular speed checks in the village to reduce offending. The chief executive of Malvern Hills District Council was present at a public meeting held on Friday the 25th January when this problem was fully discussed. it would appear that much of the concern relates to large vehicles negotiating narrow roads with wing mirrors extending over onto the pavement. This is a major concern of residents and the Beat Manager is co-ordinating efforts to reduce the problem.

Research Conclusions

A full research report is available, 'Crime, Safety and Policing in the Countryside: Fear of Crime and Perceptions of Policing in Rural Areas of West Mercia Constabulary' Dr Richard Yarwood - University of Plymouth.

The Executive Summary - final paragraph reads as follows :

The establishment of the Rural Safety Initiative is a welcome innovation. This report has recognised that crime concern is less problematic than first thought. The Rural Safety Initiative allows these fears to be evaluated in a balanced way through widespread consultation. As well as identifying crime concern, the initiatives have the potential to foreground other rural issues and improve the quality of life for many residents. The strength of the Rural Safety Initiative lies in its partnership philosophy, utilising talents from the public, police and other agencies. Drawing on these resources, it is possible for Initiatives to deal with safety as well as criminal issues. The public will benefit from being, and more importantly, feeling safer. The police will benefit from improved relations and a more efficient use of their time in rural areas.'

RSI Conclusions

1. At this stage it is clear that the Rural Safety Initiative is achieving results. In addition, from our experience of seeing these groups in action , their work results in a greater feeling of community and social cohesiveness as residents talk to each other, often for the first time, to discuss problems and possible solutions.
2. The RSI is a low-maintenance scheme requiring very little police involvement once the initial training has been delivered. In fact, the Hereford schemes have delivered with no local police involvement due to secondments to a Major Incident.
3. Research findings - The final report ' Crime, Safety and Policing in the Countryside: Fear of Crime and Perceptions of Policing in Rural Areas of West Mercia Constabulary' - Dr Richard Yarwood, indicates a very positive response to the Rural Safety Initiative.
4. The RSI is being recognised as good practice, as other Policing Forces seek to introduce this initiative.

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