

# **Goldstein Award Application 2020**

## **Warwickshire Police – Operation Hillman**

### **Summary**

#### **Scanning:**

From March, 2019, onwards, reports were received by Warwickshire Police from farmers who found their sheep butchered in the fields and this later included incidents of theft. The types of sheep targeted changed from pregnant ewes to fat lambs and breeding stock. Bordering forces, especially in Northamptonshire and Leicestershire experienced similar crimes. As well as the animals affected there was also concern about the standard of the meat and it getting into the human food chain. Goals were set to safeguard potential victims and increase the confidence of the rural community in the police.

#### **Analysis:**

Data was gathered by using incident numbers and utilising relationships with partnering organisations, neighbouring forces and the communities involved. Despite past incidents of sheep butchery and theft being sporadic, the problem had seen a dramatic increase over a short period of time. Offenders could not be easily identified, but a community where they could have potentially resided was identified through partnership working. The harms associated with the problem were unparalleled, ranging from monetary to psychological and physical, with an untold number of potential victims. The problem analysis triangle was used to identify offender, location and victim characteristics, later aiding in devising a response.

#### **Response:**

Multiple angles were tackled in response, utilising the problem analysis triangle, the 25 techniques of situational crime prevention and psychological theory to be as effective as possible. Where handlers could not be identified, we encouraged community vigilance to disrupt the offender's behaviour. We also looked into innovating an entirely new method of protecting remote fields of livestock and used community engagement and partnership working to build confidence within the rural communities.

#### **Assessment**

The goals and objectives of the problem solving plan were achieved, evidence pointed to the rural community's confidence in the police reaching a new high, leading to improved victim wellbeing and a higher number of incident being reported post-response. After a neighbouring force apprehended the offenders red handed, the incidents in the rural communities in and around Warwickshire ceased. However, Operation Hillman has opened doors for similar incidents to be investigated more effectively in the future; including the creation of a specialised rural crime team.

## Description

### **Scanning**

Warwickshire is a rural county situated in the middle of England and shares its rural scenery with surrounding counties. The rural nature of the county is reflected by the fact that no cities are located within Warwickshire. However, with England's second most populated county of West Midlands bordering to the west and numerous other cities in the surrounding counties, Warwickshire sits in a vulnerable spot.

The rural nature of Warwickshire lends itself to a large number of livestock farms in and around the county. As such, Warwickshire has a history of sporadic incidents of one or two sheep being found butchered in fields or stolen. However in March 2019, 7 incidents relating to 59 sheep occurred in one month. These incidents involved farmers finding the inedible remains of the sheep's fleeces, entrails, feet and sometimes heads upon checking on their flock in the mornings or their sheep missing and possibly taken to be slaughtered elsewhere.

In March 2019, Warwickshire Police was already aware of similar incidents that had occurred in surrounding areas by the time the problem was identified locally by farmers who had been victimised. The first three incidents occurred on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2019 in Northamptonshire, the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2019 in Leicestershire and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2019 in Warwickshire. From then on, similar incidents began to be reported across Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and West Mercia, with numbers being butchered differing between 7 and 24. The only variation in incidents came from 2 cases of sheep being taken from farms and slaughtered in different locations outside the counties they had been taken from, but could be traced back due to the head with the ear tag number being left at the slaughter location.

Links to partners and stakeholders were built between Trading Standards, Environmental Health, the Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU) and the Food Standards Agency. The National Farmers Union (NFU) and the Rural Watch Scheme were utilised by Warwickshire Police to disseminate alerts to farmers which raised awareness of the crimes being committed against sheep; this provided farmers with reassurance and advice on how to protect their stock.

Due to the hazards of the problem effecting people monetarily, emotionally and physically (described below) and with Warwickshire Police's emphasis on utilising problem solving as a tool, a problem solving plan for the issue of illegal sheep butchery and theft was opened in April 2019. This allowed Warwickshire Police to work with partnering organisations and neighbouring forces to respond to the problem as effectively as possible. The problem solving plan was dubbed 'Operation Hillman' and focused on a force wide approach, due to incidents being reported in both the North and South of the

county, the majority of the county being rural and the fact that Warwickshire sat in the middle of other victimised counties.

Upon trying to find information pertaining to how others had dealt with similar incidents in the past, it was found that no national statistics were available. However, we did find that forces across the country who had dealt with similar incidents before were treating the calls in different ways, with some just issuing a crime number and others visiting the scene to try and investigate, but there was no cross reference or consolidation of information. This demonstrated why a problem solving plan was so important, as it allowed us to associate the separate incidents across Warwickshire and surrounding counties and establish a unified response to proactively tackle the root cause of the problem, rather than just dealing with it reactively.

### **Analysis**

At the time of the plan's creation, there had been sporadic accounts in the past of similar incidents, however the month previous to the plan's creation there was a sharp increase with 7 incidents in March alone, compared to 2 reported incidents in the whole of 2018. The March incidents in Warwickshire, combined with the incidents in surrounding counties demonstrated that the problem was quickly becoming a concerning trend, with 13 incidents affecting 182 sheep and new born lambs. From the very beginning of incidents being reported in Warwickshire and an awareness of similar crimes in neighbouring counties being identified, the need for an ongoing spreadsheet with all the information pertaining to the crimes was established and maintained for all the counties involved. This spreadsheet assisted the other forces involved by allowing the information to be reported, monitored and updated easily, allowing relevant people within the force on a local, regional and national basis to stay informed and allowing for the analysis of emerging patterns. The crimes were recorded and broken down by location, type of animal targeted, modus operandi, evidence left at the scene, date and time frame, possible link corridors, weather conditions and if they were a repeat victim.

Throughout the plan, to gather intelligence for continued analysis, follow up any potential leads and reassure rural communities, it was key that Warwickshire police kept the farmers constantly informed of the incidents and the action being taken. It was important to increase vigilance, encourage the reporting of suspicious activity, provide crime prevention advice and ensure farmers that were concerned or targeted received the right response when they contacted the police.

This approach was successful, but relied on a golden hour response (not always possible due to priorities on calls with the threat, harm and risk evaluations within the forces) and availability of resources. Other issues included that initially each incident had a different Officer in Charge (OIC) allocated to each crime, who also had multiple other offences to investigate, scene of crime officers

(SOCO) were not involved in the first offences and some officers had not collected and dealt with potential evidence at the scene in the proper manner. Furthermore, no record of past incidents was easily accessible on any police system, thus researching past similar incidents or repeat offenders across the country was difficult. However, this was remedied with the opening of the problem solving plan. In Warwickshire, our problem solving plan system sits within the force's intranet, linking to STORM, on which we record incident data and GENIE, on which we record offender data. This system can be accessed by anyone within the police force, allowing officers and an overarching OIC to add to the plan if new information came to light.

An operational order was implemented within the force and all sheep incidents reported became part of Operation Hillman. A trigger plan was initiated, meaning if a call was made to the call handling centre that mentioned sheep being targeted or suspicious behaviour in a field, the control room had a procedure to follow ensuring resources were allocated appropriately. This included ensuring all potential sources of evidence was checked and recorded, followed up by the local policing teams to support the farmers and alerts going out to see if any member of public had seen anything that could help the police with their enquiries. This also warned farmers in the area that an incident had happened and to be extra vigilant with their flock. A briefing was placed on the force tasking providing details on Operation Hillman, advising what it was, the areas where patrols needed to be extra vigilant and the procedure to take if called to an incident. At locations that had been targeted more than once or been a victim and felt very vulnerable, additional patrols were put in place and beam alarms and wildlife cameras deployed in key areas of the field.

The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) were contacted and provided a list of all known owners of sheep in the county and a letter was sent to each one providing an update on the investigation, recommendations for crime prevention, advice on what to do if they saw anything suspicious including starting the call by mentioning Operation Hillman and reassurance that the police were doing everything possible to catch the offenders. However, the NFU's farmer's address list was found to be out of date. We overcame this by attending livestock markets and handing out the letters personally. The engagement with the rural community, the trigger plans and operational order within the police were essential to ensure a streamlined, consistent flow of intelligence, thus allowing for continual analysis of the problem and public opinion. The feedback showed that by doing the alerts and keeping the farming and rural community informed, they had confidence that everything was being done to catch the offenders.

The response adopted by Warwickshire was unprecedented, the likes of which had not been seen in the UK before. Research showed that most other forces had treated similar incidents purely reactively in the past, whereas the incidents in Warwickshire were dealt with individually as they were so unusual

in nature. These crimes had either provided no lines of enquiry or on one occasion, when caught in the act, the offenders had been charged and sentenced. Identifying the problem in its early stages, working with other forces experiencing similar incidents and acting as a central point of contact assisted all parties concerned. Being a rural county, not addressing the problem in a satisfactory manner would mean alienating a large proportion of our community, meaning a fresh response would have to be devised.

To identify the offenders, analytical work was done on Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR), looking at vehicles in the vicinity of incidents. This tactic, along with utilising the press and social media to highlight crimes and appeal to the public for information, provided intelligence to specific areas within cities in neighbouring county, West Midlands: Birmingham and Coventry. The information was followed up, and began to lead to a focus on a specific community.

Identifying possible vulnerable locations where resources could be channelled to catch or deter offenders was difficult to the vast scale of potential targets. The number of sheep in fields across the county was immeasurable and there were few repeat victims. Map plotting provided possible crime corridors that the offenders could have used to travel and select targets, all of which linked to the two cities identified.

A respected member of a local abattoir attended two scenes of crime at different locations and advised that the offender(s) were skilled butchers, using techniques differing slightly from modern methods. An approximate time when the offences were being committed was provided by scene of crime officers, who established that on most occasions the crimes were being committed between 03:00hrs and 0500hrs, when daylight was breaking and providing adequate visibility and weather conditions were good. Because of the possible time scale of the crimes, it was believed dogs were being utilised to round up the sheep. It was also established that the offenders had pre-visited the locations in the daylight prior to committing the offence and ascertained entry/exit, a way to hang carcasses for butchering and where they could commit the offence without being seen.

Offenders targeted remote locations, away from houses or farms. Even fields that had previously been targeted were hard to defend due to multiple potential points of access, poorly secured perimeters, non-existent onsite security, lighting or natural surveillance visible to the passing public roads. There was no distinctive pattern or way of knowing when or where flocks would be hit. From February 2019 onwards, flocks of sheep were being targeted in areas all over the counties identified. Furthermore, the majority of farmers did not have the ability to move the animals closer to the farms or to a more secure location. This demonstrated the problem in its simplest form. Warwickshire, owing to its rural nature, is home to innumerable sheep in countless fields in remote locations across the county, which are naturally incredibly difficult to target harden.

From late February to Early March 2019, when the first crimes were being reported in Warwickshire and neighbouring counties, the offenders were targeting heavily pregnant ewes. This was possibly because the sheep were easier to catch, both due to their condition and because they were in an enclosed area, ready for lambing. However, this was soon disproved when the farming calendar continued and offenders targeted sheep that had just given birth, then fat lambs, ewes without lambs and finally breeding stock.

In regards to the problem analysis triangle (PAT), little was known about the offenders or their motivations. The intelligence gathered pertaining to the possibly linked communities in Coventry and Birmingham suggested they could be of Eastern European origin. Without knowing who the offenders were specifically, handlers would be difficult to identify. Therefore, it was established that community engagement tactics would increase vigilance in their local communities, possibly leading to the communities themselves becoming an effective handler and consequently discouraging the offenders' behaviour. The farms and farmers were placed within the location and victim categories of the PAT along with the sheep. This is where the links with partners and relationships officers had built with farmers became vital for disseminating information and providing support, as farmers would generally be both the manager of their farms and guardians of their flock.

As the offenders and motive could not be ascertained, underlying causes could not be established at this point of the problem solving plan. However, due to the nature of the targeted farms' inability to be secured from willing offenders and the lack of natural and formal surveillance on the remote fields at night, it was clear the problem solving plan should revolve around removing the offenders, hardening the targets of both the fields and the sheep and providing the victims with support in order to reduce the problem.

The harm caused to the farmers, rural community and animals by these crimes was unprecedented. Because the crimes began around lambing season, heavily pregnant ewes were being chased in a flock before some of them were butchered which could have caused damage to the surviving ewes themselves and their unborn lambs. The butchered ewes and death of their unborn lambs was a further loss to the farmers, due to their potential of either going for meat later in their lives or becoming selected for breeding. A few incidents saw the very young lambs of butchered ewes surviving the night and being found by the farmer the following morning. These instances were often more costly than if both sheep had been killed, as the orphaned lambs required hand-rearing. In one incident, the hand-rearing of the orphaned lambs became untenable, forcing the farmer to give the lambs away to a children's charity farm.

The emotional trauma suffered by the people who found the remains of the butchered sheep was equally significant. Some of the animals had been pets, hand-reared and cared for with names. Others

had been found by the farmer's children. Some were devastated by the loss of a long line of quality breeding stock that could not be replaced. Further victims reported serious effects on their own wellbeing, as they could not sleep as they were in constant fear for their livestock and would repeatedly go out at all times of the day and night to check on their flocks.

Further issues of concern was for the meat taken from the carcasses getting into the human food chain. The animals had been killed in an open field with unknown objects and the meat had been moved and stored in unknown conditions. The animals themselves had not gone through the vigorous checks in place at abattoirs that ensure the meat is fit for human consumption. The danger of this was demonstrated by one incident in Northamptonshire where butchered sheep had just been treated for flystrike with chemicals and had recently been wormed, making them a serious health hazard to anyone who ate their meat. This incident, along with the possibility of the offenders choosing unsuitable sheep again, extended the number of people who could be affected by the crimes being committed.

### **Response**

Operation Hillman was created with the goal of preventing and detecting the illegal slaughter and theft of sheep in Warwickshire. As such, the corresponding measurable objectives were safeguarding potential victims and restoring confidence within the rural community, target hardening potential targets and if possible, apprehending the offenders of the crimes.

Where the intelligence and investigations suggested a certain community may be involved in areas of Birmingham and Coventry, work was done with the West Midlands Police neighbourhood teams. We targeted the highlighted community for three reasons: to utilise the community as the offender's handler, to utilise the 'alert consciousness' technique of situational crime prevention and finally, to utilise 'nudge theory'; a concept which encourages people to make decisions tailored towards their own self-interest, which in the context of crime, involved providing contextual clues to influence offenders against offending, as described in a study by Sharma and Scott (2015). We utilised these three tactics by creating a flyer, which was translated into the community's language and aimed to increase awareness of livestock and suspicious meat being in the area and how to report any information confidentially to the police. This aimed to disrupt the offenders' behaviour by alerting them that we were aware of them and taking action.

Thanks to the continued and consistent communication with partners identified above, when intelligence came in on a suspect butchers in one of the communities highlighted, joint visits and warrants were executed on the property with officers from different forces involved. Unfortunately no mutton or lamb was found at the premises but there was other meat and concern with regard to hygiene practices.

As incidents were plotted, the A5, which runs through the three counties affected, became a concern as a crime corridor. A tri-force operation was carried out overnight with resources from the three force areas of Northamptonshire, Leicestershire and Warwickshire covering their own section of the area along this route but working together at a joint base. Representatives from the NFU that had been working with officers throughout Operation Hillman were invited along to observe the operation and pass information onto their members. This strengthened the good relationship the police and NFU have and enabled an article about the work being done to tackle the problem to be written for their magazine, proving further means of keeping farmers and rural communities informed. Visiting farms along the A5 corridor on the night of the operation, engaging at livestock markets and through partners, positive feedback was received that the awareness advice was acknowledged by the farming and rural communities and that they felt the police were doing all that they could to catch the offenders. The partnership working between the forces was also positively acknowledged.

As mentioned previously, due to the lack of information on previous responses and Warwickshire's community being largely rural, a long term, proactive response was needed to be implemented. Analysis of public opinion gained through our intelligence sources suggested that this was also a concern of the community. Additionally the vulnerability of remote fields and their sheep because of a lack of management and guardianship, as laid out by the PAT, was key to ensuring our objective of target hardening was met. A method addressing this, as well as aiding the psychological damage to farmers, addressed in analysis, was found.

Research discovered a company that used a tracker system for livestock which sent out an alert to the farmer if the animals went out of a specific area. Such a device would allow for an alert system that warned the farmer and police if a crime was in progress, addressing the apprehension of offender objective. The force is presently working with the company to develop this device to be a bespoke tracker that can also monitor the speed of the sheep wearing it, allowing for alerts to be sent out if the sheep begins to run at speed. This would alert the farmer to possible livestock worrying incidents, theft and round up for butchery. To be a potential aid for farmers it needed to be practical and affordable. To establish this, a meeting was arranged that included the three forces, a farmer who had been a victim and the National Farmers Union. As sheep are flight animals they respond as a flock, so a tracker and harness only had to be fitted to one of two of the animals. By the forces joining together and the NFU also taking part, the cost of the tracker could be brought down considerably in price and this saving passed on to farmers who wanted to use the equipment. The concept was very favourably received by the forces and farmers involved and a trial of this product is presently being carried out. A need for a force rural crime team to further prevent similar incidents occurring was also highlighted and in October 2019 Warwickshire set up a dedicated team of officers who now monitor daily rural



incidents and respond and engage directly with farmers. This has produced significant results and raised public confidence in rural crimes being dealt with by specialist officers. The initial team of 6 is due to increase to 10 in the forthcoming months and a force strategy implemented.

### **Assessment**

In October, 2019, following intelligence from the farming community Northamptonshire Police set up surveillance in an area where a suspicious vehicle had been seen and caught three offenders butchering sheep in a field in the early hours. The offenders arrested were placed on remand and in March 2020 2 males received sentences of 4 years and 4 months and the other male received 2 years 11 months. All 3 offenders were from Birmingham and the Eastern European Community. This provided evidence for the accuracy of our analysis. Although the offenders were apprehended in Northamptonshire for crimes within their county, no further incidents were reported in Warwickshire or Leicestershire after their arrest.

The arrest of offenders and subsequent lack of further incidents is one of many successes of Operation Hillman. As such, all of the plan's goals and objectives were achieved and evidenced.

The proactive awareness of the campaign for the need for vigilance around livestock and reporting of suspicious activity has encouraged members of the community to continue to advise the police of incidents of concern. Regular meetings with partners, farmers and the sending out of alerts has been maintained and proactively keeps the engagement and information thread with the rural communities. This has improved the confidence of rural communities and allows for the prevention of further incidents becoming so widespread in the future, as well as increasing victim wellbeing. As such, this has seen the increase in the number of incidents being reported by the rural community.

Partnership and agency working goes from strength to strength with regular meetings and updates on livestock issues and forces regularly now sharing intelligence. The need for a central monitor for all forces has been acknowledged and Opal (national intelligence coordination) monitors and liaises when similar situations arise. With the implementation of the Rural Crime Team joint working with neighbouring forces on all key areas of rural crime, including livestock continues with daily monitoring of incidents allowing trends to be picked up and acted on quickly and effectively.

Following the sentencing of the 3 offenders no similar incidents have been reported in Warwickshire. However from February 2020 there have been occasional incidents of sheep being stolen in very low numbers in the county. These were immediately followed up and investigated by the Rural Crime Team whose fast action has allowed for evidence to be gathered which suggests these new incidents are due to different offenders for separate reasons. However, the work being done as part of Operation Hillman continues to help safeguard farms, farmers and their livestock.

Incidents of larger scale theft of sheep have been seen in other areas which may be a displacement of the problem, however, this is believed to be more than just the one Organised Criminal Gang. This has recently been evidenced by a neighbouring force discovering an illegal abattoir. However, the close working relationships built up through Operation Hillman have allowed for good information sharing and proactive engagement with possibly affected communities to curb the problem.

**Words:** 4000

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