

Safer Neighbourhoods Partnership

with John Koenigsberger, Chairman Rushmoor Neighbourhood Watch Association

Taking as his theme, “Nobody tells me anything”, John Koenigsberger gave a very interesting overview of the role of Neighbourhood Watch within the Rushmoor Safer Neighbourhoods Partnership, approaching the subject from an unusual viewpoint by focusing on communications. Punctuated by amusing anecdotes, John’s talk was lively, entertaining and extremely thought-provoking.

He began by explaining how we all filter information according to its immediate relevance to us personally; we simply don’t hear/remember what doesn’t concern us. Thus, in a sense, we are both selfish and blinkered, and effective communication must take this into account. To illustrate his contention that we filter out that which is of little relevance, John cited the election of the Police and Crime Commissioner, in which only 10% of the electorate voted. In spite of extensive coverage, via a range of media, it somehow failed to register, to the extent that John frequently encounters people with no knowledge of the PCC.

Successful communication has changed over time. For centuries news sheets and newspapers were the means by which people found out what was going on, formed their opinions and made their decisions, and there would inevitably be some commonality of opinion as a result. Later, the wireless became an important source of information, so people now had a choice of media and opinion would be correspondingly more diverse. The invention of television brought even more choice, increasing as the number of channels increased, with opinion even more diverse. Now, with the internet, we receive information from such a wide range of sources that many of us experience information overload. Unfortunately, the greater the diversity of information, the less we have in common to discuss.

In spite of all the channels by which information can now be disseminated, it seems the grapevine remains the most effective locally. People typically find out what is going on in their neighbourhood by word-of-mouth. And it is this basic principle that Neighbourhood Watch uses, for instance, to warn of the dangers of leaving windows wide open during warm weather, or to offer advice on garage security.

John places the emphasis firmly on the “neighbour” in Neighbourhood Watch, and works with the Rushmoor Mediation Service to help resolve disputes, in addition to his other responsibilities. He also works with Trading Standards, Rushmoor Borough Council, Rushmoor Voluntary Services and Safer North Hampshire, among other bodies, and it is this strong network that has resulted in Rushmoor having one of the lowest crime rates in Hampshire, and, indeed, in the UK.

Rushmoor Neighbourhood Watch currently has 9000 members, with 400 co-ordinators. Crime sprees tend to increase recruitment, but it is generally the police who take on the task of recruiting new co-ordinators, something they undertake during their day-to-day work. Some of Rushmoor’s police officers are positively evangelical about the value of Neighbourhood Watch and are exceptionally successful at recruitment. And the effectiveness of Neighbourhood Watch is amply demonstrated in their crime statistics.

The NW website has an area for each “beat”, and John filters information from the co-ordinators to ensure that the material posted is both relevant and of interest. Even so, there are sometimes misconceptions about issues such as visibility, where individuals complain that police/John, as Chairman of Neighbourhood Watch have not been out on the streets when in fact they have.

John mentioned the Nominated Neighbour Scheme, where vulnerable residents nominate someone to speak on their behalf, so they don’t need to answer the door to anyone they don’t know; they can simply direct them to their nominated neighbour, who can also deal with any emergency.

Where Safer Neighbourhood Partnership works well, there should be regular beat surgeries and beat forums, which bring together police, councillors, housing associations, churches, residents associations, etc., to discuss issues of importance and decide policing priorities. Forums should ideally be organised by someone in the community, but where that doesn’t happen, sometimes the police or RBC will step and organise a forum to ensure that residents get their opportunity to participate in this important process.

The restructuring of the police is causing grave concern because the reduction in the number of officers could mean they simply can’t make themselves available in quite the same way as they have in the past. (PC Lee Jeffers had been scheduled to offer the police perspective on Safer Neighbourhood Partnership, but was unfortunately called away on police business).

Although it was disappointing that PC Jeffers was unable to speak to us, it was nevertheless a stimulating evening, leaving us with a great deal to think about, not least whether we should get involved ourselves.

For more information, or to contact John, visit the Rushmoor Neighbourhood Watch Association website: <http://www.rnwa.org.uk/>