

Draft article for Digest

Two-Way Radio in the Community

The National Neighbourhood Watch Association two-way radio project is in its second year and Neighbourhood Watch members are now seeing the benefits of NNWA's partnership with Motorola - "NNWA Official Telecommunications Sponsor and Radio Partner". Police Officers and Community Safety Practitioners are also witnessing the positive effects two-way radio has on reducing crime and anti social behaviour and how it can help tackle the increasing fear of crime by raising confidence of the radio users and their neighbours. The original Neighbourhood Watch philosophy of "looking out for each other" now encompasses "listening out for each other" too.

A multi agency approach between Tunbridge & Malling Borough Council, Kent Police and NW members in Snodland, Kent has successfully used two-way radios in crime "hot spots". PC Mick Wright says, "NW members with radios can talk to each other "real time", identifying the movements of suspicious vehicles or people and keeping a very close eye on anti-social behaviour. They can make sure the police are kept up to date with real first-class quality information and intelligence." The two-way radios were used as part of a pro-active crime reduction package, enabling the community and the police to work together to tackle vehicle crime, daytime burglary and theft from outbuildings. The information gathered has led to high profile arrests with up to 40% reduction in crime.

Warwickshire Police in Water Orton, Coleshill have issued two-way radios in troubled areas, following crime trends. NW co ordinators use two-way radios as a deterrent. PC Wayne Cooke, the local Community Safety Officer, says "Not only are the radios effective to help fight crime but enable the community to keep an eye on vulnerable people". Signs have also been posted informing the public that radio surveillance operates in the area.

Newton Regis Neighbourhood Watch members are also using two-way radios to combat crime and anti social behaviour. The area Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator says “We’ve found the radio system to be a very valuable asset and it has so far proved its worth on several occasions and we now have a very much reduced crime level”.

In evaluating NW two-way radio schemes there is conclusive evidence that the Police have a large part to play in helping to set up schemes and being involved on an ongoing basis through the local beat officers or community safety or NW liaison officers. Those areas where NW members have been given very little guidance from their local police have often shown poor results due to the lack of understanding of how two-way radios can be deployed to the best effect. To be successful, a radio scheme needs to be a two way partnership between the NW radio users and local community safety agencies.

Evaluations of the two-way radio schemes are on going. For example Inspector Steve Lavin of Rotherham Community Safety Department made an initial detailed evaluation after three months of the scheme he set up in Rawmarsh and Parkgate, South Yorkshire. Although during this short period there was no noticeable reduction in crime, there was a clear reduction in the fear of crime. Many Police Officers believe the fear of crime alone can have real consequences for the community irrespective of the actual risk, and therefore as an issue of social concern has to be taken as seriously as crime prevention and reduction. There was also a substantial improvement in communication between participants, police, other local agencies and neighbours giving a knock on effect of improving community relations. Increased communication helps to build the trust and confidence of the public and this is essential for effective policing. The evaluation enabled Inspector Lavin to see the immediate positive impact of the radios and how they could be deployed in the future. He felt that with more radios the project could eventually have a positive impact on crime and disorder in the Rotherham area.

The NW two-way radio schemes currently use NW branded Motorola T6222 two-way radios. This type of “back-to-back” radio (where there is no base station required) operates on the licence-free PMR 446 waveband. Therefore setting up costs can be as little as a few hundred pounds with no ongoing charges - considerably less than a CCTV set up.

A vigilant public which has the means to gather and disseminate information is of enormous help to Police Officers involved in crime reduction and community safety. Two-way radio is proving to be an ideal tool enabling instant communication between NW members, either on a “one to one” or “one to many” basis. If a local beat officer or a local authority worker such as a Neighbourhood Warden or caretaker also carries a radio, they can be included in the communication loop. However, NNWA always makes it clear to members that they must never depend on there being a NW radio carrying police officer on duty locally and should always use traditional means of communication in an emergency.

Out of approximately 155,000 Neighbourhood Watch schemes across the UK there is still only a small percentage using two-way radios but as the benefits become apparent to Police Officers and Community Safety Practitioners, NNWA predicts a huge uptake.

John Howell, Director General, NNWA says. “The NW two-way radio project is potentially the biggest initiative in tackling crime and anti social behaviour since the inception of NW some 20 years ago but this initiative can only reach its full potential with the co-operation of those involved in community safety.”

A “Two-Way Radio Scheme Toolkit” has been produced by NNWA to help Community Safety Practitioners set up schemes in their area. To order this or for a general information pack, please call 0800 389 3632.