

Report to the Kent Police and Crime Commissioner's Governance Board

Date: 2 August 2016

Title: Tackling Rural Crime

From: Chief Constable

OVERVIEW OF COUNTY GEOGRAPHY

1. Kent has a land area of 1,368 square miles which borders London and the counties of Essex, Surrey and Sussex and just over 350 miles of coastline including the Port of Dover, Medway (Sheerness Docks), Folkestone, Ramsgate and London Thamesport. The county is home to one city, four large urban towns and small rural villages linked by a strategic road network (SRN) including the M25, M2, M20 and M26.
2. There are currently 309 civil parishes in the Kent County Council area and a further 11 in the Medway Unitary Authority area.
3. The County of Kent is made up of many rural communities. The Force recognises the valuable contribution these communities make regarding business, tourism, culture, community safety and the economy. There are a total of 104 rural wards in Kent with a further 10 sections of the SRN that also fall under the rural crime location banner.
4. Due to the vast geographical expanse of rural Kent some areas are more vulnerable than others. This can often lead to delayed reporting by victims who may not notice offences for a few days as well as a lack of witnesses due to the sparse population in these areas.
5. Certain types of crime happen more often in rural areas and some crimes are almost uniquely rural, such as diesel or agricultural machinery theft. The impact of crime and disorder on victims and communities may be greater in rural areas where there may be fewer local amenities and people may feel more isolated and vulnerable. There may also be a perception that targeted policing in urban areas displaces crime to the countryside.

HISTORIC AND CURRENT LEVELS OF RURAL CRIME

6. A problem profile was completed in September 2014 for rural crime across Kent. Whilst the problem profile indicated that crime reduction across rural areas was consistent with reductions seen elsewhere in the County, the detection rate of crimes committed in rural areas were lower than in urban areas. There was also a rising trend of offences such as burglary dwelling, burglary other than dwelling, vehicle crime, and theft of fuel. Theft of vehicles and in particular 4x4 vehicles had also seen a particular increase.
7. Hare coursing and poaching is an annual problem during the winter months, and is seen as a legitimate cover for criminals wishing to identify opportunities for other criminal activity. Offences reported in rural wards are burglary dwelling, burglary other, criminal damage, drug offences, fraud and forgery, other offences, robbery, sexual offences, theft from motor vehicle, theft of motor vehicle, theft and handling, vehicle interference and violence against the person.
8. Rural crime occurs in lesser populated areas in remote locations away from main road networks. Hotspots for burglaries and theft include Aylesham, Tenterden, Ashford, Headcorn and Edenbridge however there is a general spread of offences being committed in all rural districts. Hare coursing or poaching is reported throughout Kent with hot spots in Shepway, Swale, Ashford and Canterbury districts.
9. Current rural crime levels for June 2016 indicate an overall increase on last year of 11.9% (183 more crimes). This is largely due to an increase in reported violence against the person and burglary other than dwelling. There has been a reduction of burglary dwellings (1 fewer crime), theft (4 fewer crimes), criminal damage (13 fewer crimes) and vehicle crime (36 fewer crimes) in rural wards.

ENGAGEMENT WITH RURAL COMMUNITIES

10. The Rural Task Force (RTF) launched in October 2014 and comprises of the Gypsy Liaison Team (GLT: 1 Sgt & 10 officers) and the Rural Liaison Team (RLT: 1 Sgt & 6 officers). These officers have specialist knowledge of rural crimes and the communities they serve. Working in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders, they tackle offenders to reduce harm. The RTF arrest and remand dangerous offenders that form serious Organised Criminal Groups (OCGs).
11. Rural communities have reported that they perceive an increase in rural crime, which is supported by lobbying groups, including the National Farmers Union (NFU) & Crime Rural Advisory Group (CRAG). The CRAG is an independent forum to assist in informing the Police how they should be operating, including development of operational resources and issues. Effectively it is a strategic delivery group that meets bi-annually, with a clear focus on rural crime reduction, alongside the need to increase the public's confidence in, and visibility of Kent Police. The RTF are supplemented by 12 Special Constables that police rural areas across the Force.
12. The Force is currently advertising for Special Constables with equestrian capabilities to form a rural mounted section. There has been much interest shown at this early development stage. On a local level Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) still do the majority of engagement assisted by the RTF when addressing enforcement issues.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING IN RURAL AREAS

13. The aim of partnership working is to introduce additional resources to provide a highly visible uniformed presence to increase public reassurance and assist in the prevention and reduction of incidents of crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour, promoting community safety and reducing the fear of crime. Kent Community Wardens and PCSOs form part of the extended police family for policing and working with the community on crime and safety issues.
14. In 2015 CRAG with Kent Police support developed the award winning information sharing app called 'Country Eye', which has proven to be successful in improving confidence in rural policing. The app is free and assists in gathering information about crimes and incidents that occur in the countryside. The app records information using a camera and GPS location setting on a smart phone. The app administration team receive the information and can broadcast to other users. The information can be forwarded to appropriate authorities and bodies for case preparation. It is very flexible and is currently being developed to incorporate Heritage Watch.
15. Kent Horse Watch and Kent Police commenced work in 2014 to reduce equine crime, through education, prevention and enforcement. Kent Police staff members were recruited to undertake the voluntary role of equine officers for their local policing district. This ensured staff with an interest and knowledge of horses and local policing areas could gather intelligence, visit victims and assist with holding local equine crime prevention evenings. Nine events were held last year, with intelligence gathered which resulted in stolen property being recovered, offenders being arrested and convicted of burglary and theft offences.
16. The following are some of the organisations the RTF work with:
 - Kent Horse Watch
 - NFU
 - Defra
 - Environment Agency
 - Trading Standards
 - Local Authorities
 - RSPCA
 - RSPB
 - Natural England
 - Historic England
 - Kent Wildlife Trust
 - National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU)
 - Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA)
 - Interpol
 - KCC (Local Access Group) (Emergency Planning)
 - Southeast Wildlife Environmental Crime Partnership

MANAGING REPEAT VENUES/LOCATIONS

17. The RTF receive daily data of overnight rural crime reported across Kent. Officers are able to research the crime and make contact with all repeat victims. They identify a pattern of offending in an area and develop an enforcement plan to be operationally delivered in partnership with other stakeholders, organisations and local policing teams. Many successful outcomes have been achieved by utilising this method. Op Bloodhound (overnight rural burglaries) saw the recovery of stolen property and arrest of a suspect in Stockbury.

FUTURE THREATS & RISKS

18. Any reduction to the current visibility of police resources in rural areas could increase the threat and risk of increased offending and the loss of confidence in rural policing. A mounted Special Constable section, as mentioned above, would provide an increased visible presence, to both reassure remote communities and gather intelligence for enforcement opportunities.

EXAMPLES OF PREVIOUS OPERATIONS AND OUTCOMES

19. Kent Police are currently working on many operations that focus on rural community issues.

OP NONAGON

20. Under the banner of Op Nonagon, the Community Policing Teams for all 12 districts of Kent have identified that many of the criminals associated with rural crime, perceive no boundaries and will travel significant distances to commit crime. It is identified that there is an intelligence gap regarding rural crime and that more work is required to co-ordinate the activity of the districts. This work will also positively impact on other county-wide initiatives such as ATM thefts and catalytic converter thefts.

21. In order to improve the co-ordination of policing activity in rural areas it was agreed that a number of days of action would be conducted between all 12 districts, working in partnership with other organisations to reduce harm and tackle offenders. Tactical Operation resources assist Local District Policing Teams on this rural crime initiative. The last Op Nonagon was held on 25 May 2016 and saw all districts participate resulting in 14 arrests for offences ranging from aggravated burglary, assault, theft and drugs supply. Activities included heritage crime theft act warrants, multi-agency road checks, arrests of outstanding offenders and high visibility rural patrolling and farm visits. Joint Kent Police and Kent Fire and Rescue Services (KFRS) patrolling took place in Dover, further increasing our proactive capabilities.

OP INNOVATE

22. The RTF and local Community Policing Teams join forces to provide proactive patrols in rural areas in hours of darkness. These teams are assisted by many local stakeholders who act as observers and position themselves in vehicles in the area. They alert the patrols directly of any suspicious activity, providing an opportunity for a timely stop of the vehicle by the police patrol. This has resulted in the arrest and disruption of criminal teams at night, the gathering of relevant rural intelligence and the strengthening of working relationships with rural communities. All build confidence in local rural policing.

OP ASSIST

23. Kent suffers from illegal dumping of waste materials (fly tipping). Many of these vehicles operate from locations within the Metropolitan area, and operate "cross-border" to conduct disposal. Additionally these vehicles and drivers run without appropriate or legal documentation. Apart from this dumping being a blight on our rural and urban areas, the operation of illegal dumping is a lucrative criminal business and costs the Local Authorities and the County millions of pounds in the removal and clear up of dumped waste. Due to the vast sums of income generated by this activity, operators and drivers have little regard for the law or the consequences of their actions, which have now extended to the dumping of waste whilst on the move causing total obstruction of carriageways and the inherent danger of other road users crashing into it. Strategic partners already engaged in detection and prosecution have been subject of assault, criminal damage to vehicles and equipment by offenders. Numerous prosecutions have taken place, one resulting in two offenders receiving a term of imprisonment.

OP MIDDLESEX

24. This operation is to assist the RSPCA to remove horses that have been grazing on land at and near to Barnfield Park, Ash, Kent. The horses which have numbered about 80 in the past have been badly neglected and left there to die. Kent Police have been called many times in the past to deal with these horses for being neglected or for being let loose on the road. The site has also been used as a fly tipping area where hazardous waste has been dumped. Partner agencies for consultation include: RSPCA, British Horse Society, Vets, Sevenoaks Local Authority and Kent County Council. The operation has led to 39 horses being seized and 4 people being prosecuted for various animal welfare offences.

OP SALMON

25. To address the issue of hare coursing or poaching, during the shooting season (September - January) the RTF deploy as a team to areas reporting this offence type. Acting on intelligence and data provided, the team successfully prosecuted 14 people in 4 months, last year, for poaching offences and seized 15 vehicles used in the commission of this offence.

CONCLUSION

26. Rural policing is currently a policing priority and high on the public agenda of Kent. The Force is currently working on a new proposed Rural Strategy and an up to date promotional rural policing video.

27. Kent Police release a 'Rural Matters' magazine to the rural community twice yearly which is hugely popular. Kent Police are committed to ensuring our rural communities receive a quality service through on-going engagement and partnership working.