

Engaging with communities using Online Watch Link

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Technology has helped Hertfordshire Constabulary to connect with residents across the county

Case study 4 mins read

Online Watch Link (OWL) allows police and communities to grow and manage watch schemes, such as Neighbourhood Watch. It provides members with the latest local alerts and crime prevention advice – sent by email, telephone or SMS – as well as live chat and a survey function.

Hertfordshire Constabulary and local coordinators use OWL to communicate with thousands of watch members across the county.

165,000 people from different households are registered, which is the equivalent of one in three residential properties across Hertfordshire. It allows for real-time message alerts at street, ward, district or county level.

Engaging with communities

Hertfordshire Constabulary recognised that traditional leafleting of residents and physical surveying was time consuming and not an effective method of engagement.

Traditional Neighbourhood Watch and police community meetings saw a similar demographic of attendees, so the meetings were not truly accessible or representative of whole communities.

So in 2007, Hertfordshire looked for an IT solution that would ensure more effective engagement with Neighbourhood Watch members and communities, which could also assist with priority setting for communities. And so the OWL system was introduced.

The force has found many benefits to using OWL.

- OWL allows effective communication between police and communities, including efficient surveying of residents and messaging between specific police officers and staff. This helps the

force to hear views from a large proportion of the community and to set inclusive priorities.

- **Volume crime** investigations use OWL to make enquiries at street, ward, area or county level. This raises awareness of crime and encourages crime prevention and vigilance. It can also be used to appeal for witnesses, CCTV and intelligence without traditional house-to-house enquiries, which are highly visible to potential suspects.
- Sighting requests sent out by OWL have been effective at finding missing persons.
- Details of suspects sent out on OWL have resulted in their quick recognition and location.

Using the system

The OWL system is managed and administered by a liaison team of police staff and volunteers. The team works in partnership with the HertsWatch Committee – the umbrella organisation for watch schemes in Hertfordshire – which includes volunteer district Neighbourhood Watch coordinators and local policing teams.

Messages can be sent in the OWL system by the liaison team, local safer neighbourhood policing teams, local volunteer Neighbourhood Watch coordinators and any other authorised person. Using OWL:

- officers can send out community messaging in relation to crime investigations and appeal for intelligence or witnesses
- police can gauge their performance and response to community incidents
- residents can be surveyed to gauge their views about local police priority setting
- members can respond directly to the message's author by email, or to the liaison team's email address with any questions

Targeting messages

As well as Neighbourhood Watch, other watches are managed through OWL.

These include Senior Watch, which provides scam alerts and crime prevention advice to those who care for or support elderly people, and Business Watch, which helps to reduce crime and keep local businesses safe.

This allows members to receive alerts about other areas and interests impacted by crime, including crime relating to dogs, horses, rural areas and canals.

Messages are sent to individuals by location of the user and relevance.

Hertfordshire Constabulary has found gaps where they need to target communities to sign up to OWL by using community mapping to overlap with the users of the system. In some areas, the force has signed up 90% of the community.

The levels of engagement have been demonstrated by a high rate of responses to surveys.

For example, of all UK forces who shared a recent road safety survey with their communities, Hertfordshire Constabulary received the largest response after sharing it using OWL.

A survey of Hertfordshire OWL members in October 2020 received responses from 16,195 people. Of those who took part in the survey (either the whole survey or particular sections):

- nearly 80% found the local crime alerts (12,115) and scam and fraud alerts (12,204) very useful
- more than 90% either agreed (10,562) or strongly agreed (2,942) that OWL messages help them to feel connected to their local policing team and Neighbourhood Watch coordinators
- more than half (7,951) agreed that OWL helped them to stay informed during the COVID-19 lockdowns

About the technology

Hertfordshire Constabulary has recently launched an OWL app. This utilises the user's real time location to send messages and push notification relating to crime, protective advice and missing people.

The OWL web software was designed by a private company within Hertfordshire and with whom the force has a contract. Regular assistance is provided for making technical changes, such as developing the app which Hertfordshire anticipate will assist with encouraging users from younger age groups.

HertsWatch has received the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service – an accolade that is the equivalent of an MBE for groups and charities. The OWL system has won many other awards in categories such as business innovation, digital and ecommerce, and in 2013 received a Big Society Award by the Prime Minister for reducing crime and empowering communities.

Tags

Neighbourhood policing