

Volunteer patrols on horseback to reduce rural crime

Published on 26 November 2022 Written by Police Constable Emily Thomas, Rural Crime Team, Wiltshire Police

Practice note: Wiltshire horse rider volunteer scheme

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As a PC in the rural crime team of a large and mainly rural county, I've seen our work develop considerably – not just the number of officers and the amount of equipment used, but also the results we've achieved.

Wiltshire has many inaccessible areas where vehicles can't be used or are prohibited due to the large military presence, so I was interested when I saw another force using volunteers on horseback to help patrol their county. This gave me the idea of a horse rider volunteer scheme to gather intelligence on rural crime.

Finding a memorable name for the scheme was important to avoid confusion with our existing Horse Watch scheme, which detects and prevents horse crime. I also made the decision not to include 'police' in the name, to reduce any risk that the riders could be targeted.

I kept things simple and envisaged a 'Neighbourhood Watch on horseback', with no need for vetting or providing police ID. I knew from Horse Watch that Wiltshire has a strong horse-riding community and that we could find volunteers who were already riding regularly in the countryside.

Historic England funded our first high-vis tabards, which are printed with the words 'Wiltshire Horse Rider Volunteer', as well as the Heritage Watch and Operation Apollo logos. The National Farmers Union Mutual supplied reflective bridle bands.

Working with colleagues in the citizens in policing team, we sent direct messages to our existing Horse Watch scheme members and used social media to seek volunteer horse riders. I was surprised by the uptake – we received over 100 applications!

When establishing the scheme, health and safety considerations were a key factor, as horses can be dangerous. Applicants are required to provide details of their liability insurance, to wear the

correct British Horse Society hats and back protectors, and to confirm that their horse is fit, healthy and safe to ride.

In return, we provide a 45-minute session on recognising and reporting wildlife, rural and heritage crime, as well as personal safety and the [new Highway Code requirements](#). Our training covers general crime prevention and more specific topics, such as poaching and birds of prey persecutions.

We focus on reporting methods and the relationship between local authorities and the police. We teach riders to use the what3words app to pinpoint locations, then to use Historic England and council websites for crimes that might be within their patch. We created a reporting form for volunteers, to assess whether the scheme was making a positive impact on reporting and disrupting rural crime.

Since our launch in December 2021, we have trained over 60 horse riders and have received positive feedback about the training sessions. Volunteers tell us that they have a sense of pride in doing something worthwhile for their community.

Riders have provided some useful intelligence. Often, information is linked to incidents of damaging 4x4s and misusing bridle ways that we couldn't have noticed from a car. Community policing teams and local councils have used this intelligence to solve problems.

The scheme is thriving. We've received more applications and we're continuing our training, which will include an update on hare coursing before the season starts. We emphasise to riders that every report, however small, helps us to develop the intelligence picture and to put resources into areas with identified issues. The volunteers provide Wiltshire Police with more eyes and ears on the ground, in places we may not be able to reach easily or quickly.

- This article was peer reviewed by Sergeant Tamara Tatton, Cumbria Constabulary.

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