



Photography: Gilbert Johnston

Tackling crime: Sgt Ed Turner and Insp Kevin Tuck

Fighting fear

As forces are increasingly encouraged to work across borders to combat criminals who move from place to place, John Dean reports on a scheme involving four forces in the North working together to tackle rural crime.

When the team behind Operation Ceramic started planning their initiative the aim was to strike a blow against criminals bringing fear to rural areas in northern England. The operation was devised by officers at the police station in Barnard Castle, a small Durham dales market town, and involved neighbouring forces in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Northumbria.

The operation focus was on problem crimes including house burglaries, auto-theft and the stealing of farm equipment, but there were also operations aimed at offences such as the use of illegal red diesel through to anti-social behaviour in villages.

“We also have burglars and vehicle criminals who travel into Teesdale from outside the area because they see it as a soft option. The impact of their crimes can be greater in people’s minds than the reality.

“The idea behind Ceramic was to identify and arrest criminals, gather intelligence on their activities and offer

reassurance to isolated communities and stress that everyone was working together in partnership. Another important element was to encourage the role of volunteers,” says Insp Kevin Tuck, who is based at Barnard Castle.

Operation Ceramic initially covered the three weeks at the end of May and into June, supported by agencies as varied as the DVLA, Customs and Excise and an asset recovery team that investigates caravan theft on behalf of the caravan industry and its insurance companies. But that is just the start of the cross border operation as the team behind Operation Ceramic say that a vast amount of intelligence has been gathered which is leading to further operations.

Durham’s part of the operation is split into two areas, one half of which was aimed specifically at purely local initiatives, including tackling anti-social behaviour in villages, reducing it by 78 percent in some cases, targeting

the sale of alcohol to under-age children and eradicating signal crimes such as graffiti and criminal damage. The other part of the operation focused on crimes such as burglaries, theft and autocrime committed by offenders travelling in from outside Teesdale, the large rural upland area in which Barnard Castle stands.

Insp Kevin Tuck, commander on Operation Ceramic, said: "Teesdale actually has a low rate of crime; people are twice as safe in our area than in neighbouring towns and cities but that does not mean there is not still fear of crime. "If someone breaks into your shed and you live in a town, you can cocoon it by asking your neighbours to keep an eye on it when you are out. If you are living in isolated rural areas, you often cannot do that and that causes a fear of crime."

Those volunteers were crucial to the success of one of Operation Ceramic's main elements in what became the largest operation of its type in Northern England, covering all four forces. During one night, surveillance was conducted over 1,800 square miles of rural area by police officers supported by volunteers including Farmwatch members. The 158 people involved in the operation gathered information on suspicious vehicles.

Barnard Castle-based Sgt Ed Turner, who coordinated the night time operation, said: "No crime was committed on the night but a number of cars were stopped and contained known criminals coming into the area. We feel that had they not been stopped, they would have gone on to commit crimes that night."

Insp Tuck said: "It was the largest operation of its type in Northern England, possibly in England, and produced a large amount of intelligence that we can use for further operations.

"This was the biggest thing we have ever done in Teesdale and it was important that we showed the importance of partnership. I believe policing should be reactive and proactive and in which everyone is a partner. There was a time when police said it was our job alone to solve these problems but now there is an acknowledgment that it is everyone's responsibility."

During the three weeks the operation was running, there were 44 crimes reported, including autotheft and burglaries, of which 61 percent were detected, 152 intelligence reports were filed, 56 people were arrested, 128 stop and searches were carried out, five vehicles seized and 15 warrants executed.

Insp Tuck said: "The cynics will say that this was just a three-week hit and a promotional exercise but that is not the case. We maximised the resources we had at the time and we will build on it. Some of the agencies will be back and we will continue running operations with other forces."

This has already been happening in North Yorkshire Police, who have been running joint operations with Durham Police, increasing patrols and using local watch groups in rural areas.

Sgt Allan Harder, of the neighbourhood policing team in Leyburn, in the Yorkshire Dales, said: "We had experienced crimes including thefts of quad bikes, plants and farm equipment and realised that the offenders were coming across the border. We ran joint operations with Durham and Ceramic was part of that.

"The operations have been two-fold, gathering intelligence and detecting crime and we have seen a decrease in crime in our area. It has been a sustained campaign and if something is that successful, you need to keep running it."

PC Rob Smoult, of Northumberland area command, part of Northumbria Police, said: "The success we have had in tackling rural crime can be put down to the strong partnership we have built up with the rural community and neighbouring police forces.



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Rural crack-down

"We were contacted by Durham about an operation they were running along with farmers in their area. We used one of our new unmarked ANPR cars to detect any suspicious vehicles as well as a traffic car as an intercept vehicle.

"This was a good example of cross border working to tackle rural crime and we will continue to gather information and intelligence through initiatives such as rural Neighbourhood Watch schemes and Farmwatch."

Sgt Colin Robinson, based in Appleby, part of the Cumbria force, said: "A lot of our area is extremely rural and we do get criminals coming in after quad bikes and other items and they can disappear back over the border in five minutes. We do run operations but something like Ceramic gives you wider coverage rather than the forces acting independently. It increases your chances of catching the offenders and we did gather a lot of intelligence."