Neighbourhood Watch (NHW)

At the last meeting I agreed to find out about Neighbourhood Watch. I have contacted Mark Smith, who describes himself as the Lead for the NHW Schemes in West Suffolk, and is also Police Liaison for the Suffolk NHW Executive Committee. He put me in touch with Bill Woodhall who looks after 20+ schemes in East Suffolk but lives in Badwell Ash.

Mark advised that Hunston used to have an NHW scheme with coordinator Steve Gover, which they deleted from their books only a couple of years ago, apparently after a considerable period of inaction.

I asked them for the advantages to us of reinstating an NHW Group, given that we have an active WhatsApp Group. They both replied that the schemes that they look after also use a combination of WhatsApp and/or Facebook alongside having a registered NHW Scheme. They mentioned that we would have the support of both Suffolk NHW and the National organisation, and that they have strong links to the local police, Trading Standards and Crime Stoppers. They also have a range of leaflets, and a website that provides a wealth of information and support for scheme coordinators. Further research (partly using AI) suggests the following:

Starting a **Neighbourhood Watch group** gives the village official backing, structured crime prevention tools, and direct links to local police that a WhatsApp group simply cannot provide on its own. While your WhatsApp group is excellent for quick, informal chat, it is a ***reactive*** tool for sharing news after something happens. A Neighbourhood Watch group is a ***proactive*** system designed to stop crime before it occurs. Here is how upgrading to an official group helps your community:

1. Direct Links to Local Police

- **Official Partnership:** Our village gets a direct line to the local police neighbourhood team, helping us share accurate data instead of rumours. *(According to Bill, a policeman may attend our meetings occasionally on request.)*
- **Actionable Intelligence:** Police can pass targeted alerts and safety advice directly to our coordinator to share with the village. These updates cover crime hotspots, criminal trends, rural crime, and so on.
- **Community Voice:** It gives our parish a stronger, collective voice when asking the police for support or resources. *(I doubt this adds much to the clout that our parish clerk already has.)*

2. Proven Crime Deterrence

- **Visual Warning Signs:** You can display official window stickers and street signs, which are proven to make criminals think twice before targeting an area. *(At least one street sign is still in place from the past but none on the two main approaches to the village.)*
- **Proactive Security:** Members learn how to spot vulnerabilities, like poor lighting or weak locks, to secure the village ***before*** crime happens.
- **National Recognition:** Criminals know that Neighbourhood Watch communities actively look out for each other and report suspicious behaviour.

3. Financial and Resource Benefits

- **Lower Insurance Premiums:** Some home insurance companies offer discounts on policies if you live in an active, registered Neighbourhood Watch area. *(Mine doesn't.)*
- **Free Safety Resources:** You get access to free crime-prevention handbooks, property marking kits, and security checklists.
- **Grant Funding:** Official groups can sometimes apply for community safety grants to fund items like better village lighting or CCTV. *(Again, I doubt this adds much to the clout that our parish clerk already has.)*

4. Better Organization and Inclusivity

- **No "App Fatigue":** Not everyone uses WhatsApp, especially older residents. Official NHW groups use multiple ways to reach people, like newsletters, phone trees, or noticeboards. Elderly residents need not miss out on vital safety information just because they do not use WhatsApp. Official safety alerts or scam warnings can easily be printed and slipped through their letterboxes, and with only a small number of homes, you can pair a WhatsApp user with a non-WhatsApp neighbour to pass on urgent news by phone or a quick knock on the door ("Buddy system").
- **Verifying Information:** A coordinator filters out panic and fake news, and irrelevant material, ensuring the village only gets accurate, helpful updates.
- **Supporting the Parish Clerk:** It takes the pressure off your parish clerk by managing safety issues independently, letting them focus on other village matters. (I.e. coordinator should not be Parish Clerk.)

5. Protecting a Peaceable Village

- **Keeping it Safe:** It is much easier to maintain a low-crime area than it is to fix a high-crime area.
- **Spotting Scams:** Many modern crimes happen online or over the phone, heavily targeting older residents; the official watch gives us materials to help them spot these tricks.
- **Deterring Opportunists:** Small, quiet villages can be targets for opportunistic thieves looking for remote outbuildings or sheds; street signs send a clear message that your village homes are tightly connected.

6. Easy Management for 30-50 Homes

- **Minimal Effort:** A village of our size only needs one volunteer coordinator to run the whole scheme.
- **Simple Communication:** The coordinator can simply drop important police updates into our existing WhatsApp group, keeping things streamlined.
- **Low Burden for the Clerk:** With so few homes, a single Watch coordinator can handle all safety queries, leaving your parish clerk free for other village duties.

With a peaceful village of about 30 homes, you are in a perfect position to set up a highly effective Neighbourhood Watch. Because your village is small, you do not need a complex setup – just a simple, official framework to protect what you already have. Costs are minimal – a few pounds for some signs, but no ongoing subscription or the like.

You do not need to scrap your WhatsApp group. In fact, the best system uses **WhatsApp as the fast communication channel** and **Neighbourhood Watch as the strategic brain**. Your WhatsApp group spreads the word instantly, while your Neighbourhood Watch group provides the signs, police contact, and training to keep everyone safe.

If we want to look into starting one, we can explore the Our Watch UK Portal (www.ourwatch.org.uk). Mark Smith has offered to come to one of our meetings.

Since you already have a close-knit community on WhatsApp, you are 90% of the way there. You can register your small group for free on the **Our Watch** website, order a few street signs, and ask for a couple of volunteer "buddies" to look after your offline neighbours. You do need a volunteer co-ordinator!

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