

Neighbourhood botch

A row over logo ownership, funding shortfalls, and bitter infighting all contributed to the demise this year of the National Neighbourhood Watch Association. Now rival factions within the movement are setting up competing groups. Tania Mason reports

The collapse of the National Neighbourhood Watch Association leaves one of the UK's biggest membership organisation – eight million households belong to neighbourhood watch groups – without an independent national voice to represent members' views to government and the police force. Yet neighbourhood watch is no fly-by-night affair: as an entity, it's been around for more than 20 years, and the NNWA had existed since 1995. How did it all go so terribly awry?

Since its inception in 1995 until 2003, the organisation was on a secure financial footing thanks to a sponsorship deal with Norwich Union that provided office accommodation and funded the salaries of seven

staff. But in February 2002, when Norwich Union's new owners CGNU plc made a commercial decision to end the deal, the NNWA was plunged into crisis.

The Home Office stumped up £350,000 bridging finance and by early 2003 it looked like the Association had found a new sponsor: Lloyds TSB's insurance arm was prepared to provide various membership benefits in return for a share of any financial commission. According to the NNWA's chair Roy Rudham, the income from this deal would have enabled the Association to be self-sustaining by mid-2005 and the whole movement would have benefited by more than £1m a year by 2008.

But the partnership was scuppered when a row broke out over use of the neighbourhood watch logo. One condition that Lloyds TSB insisted on as part of the contract was that it would have exclusive commercial use of the logo. This subject was not without history – Norwich Union had used the logo throughout its sponsorship tenure with full agreement of the Home

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Office, though the deal had never precluded other organisations from using it too. But in 2002 another insurer, Direct Line, had begun using the logo without permission. When the NNWA challenged Direct Line, the insurer asked the Home Office and NNWA to provide evidence of copyright. They couldn't – the Home Office said the documentation had been lost. Around this time it also emerged that the home watch logo, which is used instead of the neighbourhood watch logo in some areas, had been registered by two other companies without any authorisation. So, early in 2003, around the time of the negotiations with Lloyds TSB, and after advice from its lawyers, the NNWA went ahead and registered the logo and neighbourhood watch name as its own. But when various local NW groups heard about this, there was outrage. Says Bill Dredge, chair of Northamptonshire Neighbourhood Watch Association: “It was not theirs to register – it belonged to the people and the local organisations. The result would have been that we would have had to ask permission to use our own logo, and we wouldn't be able to do any local deals with local insurance companies.”

Complaints flooded in to the police and Home Office and Dredge admits he alerted Lloyds TSB to the grassroots' opposition to this condition of the proposed deal. Subsequently, on 17 March 2004, just two days before the Lloyds TSB contract was due to be signed, Home Office and Treasury solicitors wrote to NNWA trustees threatening legal action over their copy-righting of the logo.



timeline

Hazel Blears, then the Home Office minister for crime reduction, policing and community safety, told a parliamentary debate at the time that the logo was Crown copyright and that the Home Office was taking steps to restore ownership to itself, "because we want to ensure that local and regional associations can continue to use it".

In the end, the NNWA passed ownership of the logo over to the Home Office – where it remains today – and Lloyds TSB wised up to the fact that it wasn't all happy families in the neighbourhood watch camp and walked away from the deal. The Home Office declined to give the Association any more funding during the subsequent fiscal year 2004/5, claiming it was relying too much on the government bailing it out instead of continuing to pursue private sector cash. This raised serious hackles within NNWA ranks, given that it was widely felt to be the Home Office's intervention that had scuppered the Lloyds TSB deal.

The funding crisis meant the organisation had to make four of its seven staff redundant. It was also forced to find cheaper accommodation, and moved out of its central London headquarters into an annexe within Hatfield police station. In the ensuing months, relations between the NNWA and the Home Office improved – "we agreed to draw a line under it and move forward", says Rudham – but the gulf between the national association and many of the local groups it represented only widened. Dredge, who chaired the Northants group which disassociated from NNWA two years ago, says many local associations became increasingly disillusioned with the board. Rudham says an email campaign against him and his board took on a life of its own, and descended into character assassinations, slander and lies. Dredge claims 14 local associations disassociated; Rudham claims only two did. What cannot be disputed is that by then, serious cracks had appeared in the neighbourhood watch movement nationally.

Internal politics notwithstanding, the NNWA could not ignore the other problem that still hampered its progress: the lack of cashflow. Rudham and the board had hopes of developing partnerships with Crimestoppers, Victim Support, Help the Aged, the Housing Corporation and the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, but they couldn't pursue these without money in the bank. Rudham felt he had no option but to look to the members for funds. So he proposed consulting members on the possibility of the Association being part-funded by local NW groups "on a subscription basis".

He knew it wouldn't be an easy ride. "We acknowledge this is a very sensitive area that many neighbourhood watch longer-serving members would strongly resist and possibly expose the fact that many schemes exist in name only," he wrote to his database

- 1994** Central Office of Information updates neighbourhood watch logo on behalf of the Home Office
- 1995** Conservative Home Secretary Michael Howard suggests changes to neighbourhood watch in order to "get them out on the streets, rather than just looking through their windows". National Neighbourhood Watch Association is formed by volunteers opposed to the vigilantism they felt his proposals implied.
- 1995** NNWA enters into sponsorship deal with General Accident, which later became Norwich Union
- 2000** NNWA hires John Howell as director-general on a salary of £80,000
- 2003** Norwich Union ends sponsorship deal with NNWA
- 2003** Home Office gives NNWA £350,000 to tide it over
- 2003** Lloyds TSB offers new sponsorship deal on the condition it has exclusive use of the neighbourhood watch logo
- 2003** NNWA registers neighbourhood watch logo as its own trademark
- 2004** Home Office and Treasury solicitors threaten NNWA trustees with legal action over their copyrighting of the logo and name
- 2004** Lloyds TSB withdraws from sponsorship deal
- 2005** Several local associations issue vote of no confidence in NNWA chair and call for his resignation. Trustees reject the call but agree to wholesale review of the organisation
- 2006** NNWA goes into voluntary liquidation

"For some time now, a small minority has been working behind the scenes, determined to undermine the work and functions of the NNWA"

of individual NW members. "The subscription could be linked to formal accreditation. This would not only enhance the standing and credibility of the movement, but would also encourage potential sponsors and funders to invest, as there would be a defined and accessible members list."

Needless to say, the idea was not universally popular. Bill Dredge points out that most NW groups have existed for years without charging their members a penny. In fact, he claims the financial situation at the national



body was a major bone of contention for many of the local associations. "Millions of pounds passed through the NNWA in the last few years yet not a penny of it went to the members or local groups," he claims. "They rented grandiose offices at Buckingham Gate for £55,000 a year and employed a director general on a salary in excess of £80,000 a year, which was infuriating when you consider that most groups are run out of people's own pockets. Eighty thousand pounds a year? This is neighbourhood watch, not Save the Children. The movement is very volunteer-led and in most cases is run by caring people who finance their own expenses."

Rudham defends John Howell's salary. "That was what we needed to pay to attract someone of his calibre, who was qualified to generate income and be the driving force behind such a diverse organisation. If you pay peanuts you know what you get."

Rudham survived a call for his scalp from various disenfranchised local groups at the end of last year, but in the end he decided he couldn't save the Association and opted for voluntary liquidation. In a statement released in June after it collapsed, Rudham admitted that the last three years had been "a difficult time" for NNWA. "For some time now, a small minority has been working behind the scenes, determined to undermine the work and functions of the NNWA. Regrettably, the continued negative campaigning by a small group of dissidents has jeopardised NNWA's ability to attract sufficient long-term sponsorship."

To this day he blames the downfall of the NNWA on "a few individuals with personal agendas who wanted to destroy the existing set-up, take it over or set up their

own". He said the "vitriolic letters" these individuals sent to MPs and sponsors led to funding drying up and ultimately brought about the Association's demise.

Unsurprisingly, the "dissidents" tell a different story. Bill Dredge puts the blame for the Association's demise squarely at the feet of Rudham and his board. "They were not fit for purpose because they were not practical, business-minded people. This is the kind of thing that can happen to normally well-run, well-meaning organisations when egos get in the way – it's a tragedy that such a great organisation can be brought down this way."

And now, it seems, both parties have their own plans for the future of neighbourhood watch nationally. Rudham is the key player behind the new UK Neighbourhood Watch Trust, which he hopes to have up and running by Christmas. As outlined on page 6, the Trust will be registered as a grantmaking charity and will not be a representative or membership body. It will manifest itself as a website, www.neighbourhoodwatch.net, and aims to make small grants to local NW groups by selling advertising and sponsorship on the site. Rudham says it has already secured agreement from the Home Office to license the name and logo to prospective partners.

Rudham adds that although the new Trust won't be constituted as a representative body, forums on its website will still allow it to "feed views into organisations like the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Home Office, which is what they want". But he admitted the forums would be strictly monitored for dissent, and censored if necessary. "We won't stifle constructive debate, but we will have strict moderation."

"It is a regrettable factor of the voluntary sector that people do have their own agendas," Rudham adds. "That's why we've decided the new Trust won't be a representative body. People will be able to register on the site to receive information, but it won't be a membership organisation."

Bill Dredge is incensed. "I am really concerned to find that a group of people who took an organisation into liquidation against the wishes of many of those it purported to represent, and without any consultation with them, can now use the assets of that same organisation to set up another without the express wishes and instructions of the membership of that organisation."

"It does not now and in my opinion never will

numerology

Number of local NW groups

138,000

Households covered by NW schemes and groups

8 million

These are 2006 figures supplied by the Home Office, for local groups and households that are registered with insurance company Ansva to receive free public liability insurance. The Home Office says there may be many more groups and households that count themselves members of neighbourhood watch but have not registered with Ansva.

again represent the real grassroots neighbourhood watch membership."

Dredge is involved in an alternative plan for a national body: "We wanted change because we wanted every one of the millions of grassroots neighbourhood watch members to be in the loop and have a proper, clean and unencumbered voice to the Home Office and access to some of the funds provided by sponsors and the Home Office," he says. "Well, they will get that voice, and it won't be long. There is a brighter future for a truly democratic neighbourhood watch – and it's on its way."

He is referring to two separate initiatives that are going on around the country. The first is the launch of two websites – www.nwinfo.co.uk and www.nwindex.net – which are populated with much of the information that was on the old NNWA site. The websites are designed and run by Jonathan Castle, who was responsible for managing the NNWA site and is no fan of Roy Rudham either. The second initiative is a Home Office and police-sponsored project to establish a regional neighbourhood watch structure, with each regional body able to nominate someone to a national board. Hertfordshire Police chief constable Frank Whiteley, who has responsibility within the police for developing neighbourhood watch policy nationally, has released one of his officers, Mark Custerson, from his day job for six months to help build up the new structure. Both Dredge and Castle say that if it gets off the ground, they will hand the new internet sites over to it, free of charge.

Others that were close to the NNWA saga are reluctant to reopen old wounds. Stuart Smith, an independent consultant who was hired to conduct a comprehensive review of the NNWA earlier this year in an effort by the board to chart a new direction, did not return calls. Alene Branton, the chief executive of the Humberside Association of Neighbourhood Watch Groups and a founder and former trustee of NNWA, refused to comment, as did Kevin Gowing, her deputy. And Rudham wouldn't disclose which other NNWA trustees are involved in his new Trust "because of what we've all been through before".

One person that is keen to see personal agendas laid

to rest in favour of some sort of national representation for the movement is Frank Whiteley, the Hertfordshire chief constable. Whiteley rescued the NNWA in 2003 by providing the premises at Hatfield police station, and he is very sorry the organisation failed. "I always found the NNWA a very useful organisation to get a coherent national view from. Neighbourhood watch is such a huge movement that it's very difficult, without a national voice, to consult that many members. There were some faults in the way it was constituted, in that it didn't represent everybody, but we were able to get a fairly coherent view."

Whiteley believes its demise owes a lot to the fact it had to subsist on commercial sponsorship money alone. "There needs to be a national representative NW body and it needs to have a secure financial basis. Exactly how that is done needs to be very carefully thought out – it may well be that some government funding is required."

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He warns that any new national body will face the same two problems that the NNWA struggled with – "how you make such a body truly representative, and how you fund and maintain such an organisation.

"Lots of voluntary membership organisations have to wrestle with these issues, but the difference here is that none are on anywhere near the same scale as neighbourhood watch."

Roger Fisher, the most senior civil servant working on neighbourhood watch issues in the Home Office, admits that uniting the warring factions won't be easy, given the history: "There are a lot of disparate, independent-minded groups out there, and trying to square that particular circle is taking up a lot of my time at the moment. But we think it's important to try and bring them together in a way that preserves their independence but gives a voice to the watch movement. It's not going to be easy but it is worth trying." ●



Herts chief constable Frank Whiteley wants to consult with a national voice

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