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OPERATION STOCK UPDATE

Friday 30 August 2019

Given continuing incidents, ongoing interests and concerns in our rural community about Operation Stock, our policing response to thefts of lambs and sheep in our District, here is an update.

Until the middle of August, we had not suffered any more incidents locally, but there had been others elsewhere in the region and country. Nonetheless, our patrols and the investigation continued. However, on Monday 19 August, a farmer flagged down one of our rural patrols to report a new slaughter incident at Whilton: the third attack on that farm this year. Then last night 29th/30th August, our Op Stock patrols came across an insecurity in a field near to the double roundabout near to Sandy Lane & Nobottle Road. On investigation and contacting the farmer, they found the grisly scene of another 25 lambs and breeding ewes butchered in the same way. On meeting the farmer, the palpable effect on him personally was not lost on me, and I genuinely feel so sorry for him as he was collecting up the grim remains of his carefully-tended flock to dispose of (pictured here with his permission).



The investigation has seen some arrests. I am asked why we don't talk about the arrests; we are limited in what we can say. What we can say is now included on a separate Op Stock section on our website where you can see the latest updates. The link is www.northants.police.uk/opstock or www.northants.police.uk/news.

On Saturday 10 August, a large team of Northamptonshire,

Warwickshire and West Midlands officers executed a number of search warrants in the West Midlands area. I watched as addresses were searched, and one unrelated arrest was made.

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Then on 16 August, alongside officers and staff from Leicestershire & Warwickshire, and enforcement officers from DVSA, we ran a night time operation based at junction 18 of the M1, targeting vehicles using the A5 corridor in the three counties, the M1 and the local countryside roads. Well over 200 vehicles were checked between 9pm and 3am. We had 30 officers, well-supported by the Special Constabulary, out and about in marked and unmarked cars.

The nightly overnight patrols concentrating on the targeted areas have continued and will continue. These have been noticed and appreciated by the farming and rural community; the keen officers volunteering for this duty have kept themselves busy and I assure you of their resolve and keenness to respond to calls and be in unexpected places to prevent and detect crime.

There have been some very good calls from members of the public reporting suspicious circumstances. One such call led to East Haddon being sealed off at 11pm on Sunday 25 August following a report of headlights in a field. It turned out to be the local farmer working late on the harvest, but was just the kind of call that might have turned our luck, and the kind of call I wish to encourage. The caller was unsure whether this should have been a 999 call and I assured her that it was definitely a 999 call. Another exemplary call received in August was from a lady reporting seeing a horse trailer backed into a field off the A428 one weekday afternoon – a field where she didn't recall ever seeing horses, but remembers it being used for sheep. It turned out that the trailer was genuinely collecting horses, and the lady then felt guilty for 'wasting our time.' It was not a waste of our time and we would rather receive ten such calls than miss one which turns out to be the call we needed/wanted.

We have been working closely with inspectors from Trading Standards, who are in the middle of routine announced and unannounced checks of farming establishments. We continue to work with the local and regional NFU, acting on preventative information and intelligence (information) brought to their attention.

With all this work: the warrants, signs, arrests, publicity, social media and the public response, it may be that we have made our District more hostile but with ongoing offending, we cannot and will not be complacent. We continue to work more closely with neighbourhood, CID and intelligence officers in Warwickshire and Leicestershire Police and wider. The patrols and operations will continue, and we continue to welcome calls from a more-alert public and farming community. Every night patrol yields an unforeseen and sometimes unconnected result: as an example, you may have seen us tweet about a number of vehicles having been seized from rural roads as a result of our ANPR operation and intercepting vehicles of interest. Unsurprisingly, other rural crime has also seen a reduction, and the feedback from the rural community is that the presence is being seen, felt and appreciated.



All of this is really important because the sad reality is that none of our offences have had direct witnesses, and there is still surprisingly little information as to where the stolen meat is being sold on.

With thefts of entire flocks of sheep forming a trend, as well as the slaughter and theft of sheep, we know that these offences will need the resources of teams of offenders. We need to know about trailers and country vehicles seen in suspicious circumstances, but also people-mover type vehicles which could conceal more people than the driver. Remember, you may hold the jigsaw piece which allows us to complete the puzzle or to have the break that we need.

Finally, and without any desire to adopt a holier-than-thou attitude, can I appeal for some cooperation and restraint on the following? I recently ended an unpleasant exchange with an individual who wanted to draw me to speculate on whether suspects for these crimes are from a particular social group. I have also been made aware of some loose and inappropriate talk on social media platforms speculating on the same subject. For these reasons, when interviewed on BBC Northampton, I was pleased to have the opportunity of saying that we do not suspect that the sheep slaughters were part of a ritualistic or religion-based practice. I would wish to urge some sensibility about this because:

- We won't confirm or deny the social background of an offender whilst an investigation is ongoing
- It restricts our investigation and open mind if we start to speculate on social grouping of offender(s)
- Where (as experienced and reported), loose social media chat speculates the social grouping, religion or ethnicity of offenders, it can (and has) led to inappropriate further comment, which could constitute hate speech or offences under the Malicious Communications Act. These would have to be looked into: something I'd like to avoid us having to do.
- Finally, and most obviously, it cannot be ethical or fair to blame a whole social group for the offending behaviour of an individual or individuals. As I said on my Twitter account, police officers are bound by a Code of Ethics and an oath of allegiance which requires us to *'act with fairness, integrity, diligence and impartiality, upholding fundamental human rights and according equal respect to all people, according to law'*

Many of the local community know I am a country church organist. As we approach Harvest time, I worry about our farmers who are under all kinds of modern pressure as they harvest. This crime trend is another palpable pressure. In addition, in all conscience I have not been able to play the Bach Adagio 'Sheep may safely graze' and want to advance the day when safely grazing sheep is again the norm in our countryside!

Thank you and to our rural community for your continued support as we continue to fight this particular crime as well as our normal daily business.

