

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT ON HOUSEHOLD BURGLARIES

At Sydney on Monday 27 October 2008

The Committee met at 2.50 p.m.

PRESENT

Mr P. E. McLeay (Chair)

Mr N. Khoshaba

Ms J. L. McKay

Mr. R. J. M. Oakeshott

Mr A. J. Roberts

Mr J. H. Turner

CHAIR: Before we start I ask everyone to turn off their mobile phones as even on silent mode they can interfere with Hansard's recording equipment. I welcome representatives of the police, the Auditor-General and the representative from his office and I thank them for appearing today to provide evidence on the Public Accounts Committee's examination of the response to the Auditor-General's report on household burglaries.

DAVID JOHN OWENS, Deputy Commissioner, New South Wales Police Force, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney,

SEAN WILLIAM HANNEN, Inspector, Manager Planning Unit, New South Wales Police Force, 1 Charles Street Parramatta,

ADAM ROBB WHYTE, Superintendent, Commander Policy and Programs, New South Wales Police Force, 1 Charles Street, Parramatta,

PETER CHARLES ACHTERSTRAAT, Auditor-General, 1 Margaret Street, Sydney, and

JANE TEBBATT, Director Performance Audit, Office of the Auditor-General, 1 Margaret Street, Sydney, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I draw your attention to the fact that your evidence is given under parliamentary privilege and that you are protected from legal or administrative action that might otherwise result in relation to the information you provide. I also point out that any deliberate misleading of the Committee may constitute a contempt of the Parliament and an offence under the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901. After I have asked the Auditor-General and the police to make a brief opening statement, the Committee will then ask questions. If witnesses wish to raise issues for discussion I ask that they direct their comments through me as Chair as witnesses may not respond directly to each other. Mr Achterstraat, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: I will make a brief opening statement. Mr Chairman and members of the Public Accounts Committee, I welcome this opportunity to support your inquiry into my report on how well the New South Wales Police Force deals with household burglaries. Essentially our report looked at how police go about preventing burglaries and how they go about solving the crime when it has occurred. We came up with three sets of recommendations. The first set of recommendations related to suggesting that police collect more data and distinguish between commercial break-ins and household break-ins. The second group of recommendations related to how police could do more to prevent burglaries, and the third group related to how police can solve burglaries quicker and better.

In relation to the second group of recommendations, the police have accepted all our recommendations except the one relating to giving feedback to households which have been burgled once, which was recommendation No. 13. In relation to the third group of recommendations, police have accepted all our recommendations except No. 9, which refers to the criteria for the local area command to set up a dedicated team. From 2001-07 household burglaries fell by 30 per cent. Recorded rates of burglary in 2007 were lower than they had been for 10 years. At that time burglary was still the fourth most common crime affecting the people of New South Wales and most people saw it as a problem in their local area. That is why we undertook the review. It was our view that the New South Wales Police had done well to maintain the downward trend in burglaries through its focus on crime prevention and arrests, but even so this improvement was less than police expected. Burglaries dropped by more than 2,500 over the period but if each area's command had met its target the overall decrease would have been more than double that.

The Police Force in 2003 implemented a set of procedures and standards on how commands should respond to household burglaries and these procedures targeted hot spots and prolific offenders. As I said, at the time of the audit police accepted all but two of our recommendations. We have not gone back to the department to audit the progress on each of these but we have noted the Police Force's response.

Mr OWENS: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon to discuss the Auditor-General's report on household burglaries. The New South Wales Police Force has made some excellent progress in reducing the number of household burglaries over the past few years. The New South Wales Bureau

of Crime Statistics and Research [BOCSAR] data indicates there is a reduction in incidence of 3.8 per cent in the financial year 2007-08 when compared to the previous financial year, 2006-07. In raw figures this is a reduction of approximately 1,817 incidents. This trend is pleasing and New South Wales Police Force data indicates that the reduction is ongoing. We are committed to maintaining and enhancing crime prevention and community safety through strategies that encourage all sections of the community to build a safe environment in which we work and live.

In January 2007 the New South Wales Premier launched a new crime prevention strategy called the Community Safety Precinct Committees in conjunction with the New South Wales State Plan to reduce the fear of crime and violence. The Premier encouraged groups to set up in towns and cities throughout New South Wales to identify key local safety issues in their area and help to devise a plan to deal with them. The CSPCs, as they are known, replace the police accountability community teams, known as PACTs that previously existed at the local area. Once each committee is formed it will scan the local area to build up a picture of its geography, policing and crime issues as well as the agencies and community resources available to them. Working groups or subcommittees can then be established to work proactively on addressing the objectives identified through this process. Working groups or subcommittees will assist the local council to develop a crime prevention plan that addresses the most prevalent crime concerns in the environmental scan, and incorporate and coordinate kindred community strategies, programs and projects.

Instead of separate committees for Neighbourhood Watch coordinators, these individuals can work with representatives from related groups or projects and programs on a larger, property crime working subgroup of the committee. All working parties shall then report back to the CSPC each quarter. Existing committees and Neighbourhood Watch teams will be invited to join precinct committees and take advantage of the resources and expertise available. Community safety precinct committees give everyone living in the community, whether they are parents, teachers, safety campaigners or just interested individuals the chance to work with the police in keeping their town or suburb safe. The benefits to the community of New South Wales are both tangible and measurable in reducing the financial burden of losses from theft and damage and the flow-on in reduced insurance premiums.

Additionally, there are intangible benefits to the public of New South Wales in increased feelings of safety generated by the knowledge that criminal activity in relation to household burglaries is reducing. The report of the Auditor-General has been a useful tool for the New South Wales Police Force and, whilst the recommendations were not accepted in their entirety, the vast majority have been acted upon and have served the New South Wales Police Force well in its continuing fight against crime.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: Deputy Commissioner, how does the percentage of household burglaries solved in New South Wales compare to other States ranking wise?

Mr OWENS: I would not be able to tell you off the cuff, I am sorry. I know the recent data for the clear-up rates. I would have to say there was very much room for improvement.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: If I were to put to you that it was the lowest in the country—

Mr OWENS: I could not comment. I can certainly get back to you and comment on that, but I do not have those figures available to me.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: Does the Auditor-General have any figures with respect to the percentage of household burglaries solved?

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: Yes. Page 29 of our report has figures up to a year or so ago, suggesting that in New South Wales the finalisation rate within 30 days of unlawful entry is 7.6 per cent and out of six States it ranked fifth. So, we had Tasmania, Western Australia, et cetera, with slightly better figures and only South Australia with a worse figure. The updated figures, I think, confirm it is around the 6 per cent to 7 per cent rate.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: So we are the lowest in the country?

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: No, South Australia. It is amongst the lowest.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: Recommendation 13, Deputy Commissioner, which was police officer security assessments for all household burglary victims in high-risk neighbourhoods, was rejected on the

premise that it was not possible or practical, although assessments will be offered subject to resource availability. As far as my community is concerned and the way I look at it, why was the determination made that offering assessments to all high-risk victims was not practicable? You obviously have officers attending the scene. Would it not take just a couple of minutes for those officers to say, "You need deadlocks here," or "I would cut that hedge back," or "This is where they have entered. You need to improve that." Would that sort of assessment not be easily provided at minimal cost and resourcing?

Mr OWENS: We do off-the-cuff assessments like that. You look at generally the point of entry and say, "You have a number of options available to you." We are talking about when we do assessments. An assessment is really from the front door to back door, side to side and then walk out of the premises to the front and then walk out the back, and there is a whole sheet and analysis that has to go on. To do that to everybody who gets broken into, no, we do not have the resources to do that. Personal responsibility has to come into it, like you and I would do. You would look at your property and you can make a decision, are you comfortable with the security you have in your premises, yes or no? If you are not comfortable with it, you can seek further guidance. If you are a repeat victim—as in you have been broken into more than once—we offer packs we can go through and then, on the assessment of the individual and the location, we can do an assessment. But we just cannot say that everybody should be offered that service. We do not have the resources for that.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: It just seems that if someone is the victim of a household burglary, why do they have to be a victim twice or three times before we act? Is it just because of resourcing?

Mr OWENS: No, you do not have to be. As I said, personal accountability has to come in. We attack the front end—and I do use the word "attack." We go after the offenders before they commit the offences. We go after the offenders after they commit the offences. The 30-day turnaround in some instances for DNA and the processing is not a realistic time frame. It takes us time to process that through the labs. If we can reduce, as we have, 1,800 people becoming victims, even if you say 200, 300, 400 or 500 of those were repeat victims, that is a good result. The more you can get at the front end that do not become victims, so much the better. When we look at repeat victims, sometimes they accept a very poor standard of security, and they are happy with that until they get broken into. That is where we have to suggest, through some of the documents that are available, go and have a look at this. Here are some practical hints, tricks of the trade, better locks, standard locks, without entering into the commercial market. We make that available and the insurance companies make that available.

CHAIR: You raise the point, in investigations finalised within 30 days, you are saying with levels of data collection and labs, is 30 days a reasonable benchmark to have, then? Given new technologies and capacities for DNA, maybe we should have a more reliable benchmark?

Mr OWENS: It is very hard because the technology is very new. It is evolving as we speak. You have to put into that as well that break and enter to an individual is a very traumatic experience but a homicide, a street robbery, there are categories that we have to give precedence to, we have to give them a priority. When you start looking at the number of people living in New South Wales compared to other States, the sizeable population and policing, it mounts up. For the number of DNA, fingerprinting, forensic procedures that we carry out, 30 days is fairly limiting. I would have to speak with the forensic people to say can we get a better guide without saying we need to make it longer. Maybe we do not; we just need to look at, perhaps, 30 days and then 90 days to look at the two turnaround points.

CHAIR: At best, in Western Australia less than 1-in-7 are completed within the 30 days.

Mr OWENS: Yes. We need to look at our clear-up rate, and we need to look at some better procedures. Some of those are based on the way that we collect our data. If we know that 20 per cent of crooks are responsible for 80 per cent of crime, if we get somebody for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 break-and-enters, sometimes that is only tagged within our computerised operational policing system [COPS] as a clear-up on that one break-and-enter as being the dominant one that they have been caught on for that day. That is why we have said we will go back and look at COPS, to find out whether we need to flag all of those COPS events to make sure that the clear-up is going across the five, not just being tagged on the one.

Mr GRANT McBRIDE: That leads to a question that I want to put to the Assistant Commissioner. First of all, I would like to compliment you on what you are doing in policing at the moment. In my own area, we are getting very good results. Certainly in the time I have been a member, the results have improved. Yours is one of the benchmarks for me in terms of how my electorate is going. If I do not get many complaints about police, then the electorate is going very well. Others I will not mention!

In relation to the computerised operation policing system [COPS], a number of responses to the recommendations made by the Auditor-General are dependent in whole or in part on enhancements to COPS, including recommendations 1, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 11. The current status of these enhancements is unclear. The Police Force's response to recommendation 4 states that the adoption of the recommendation data collection method is dependent upon available funds and that a cost assessment is under way, while the response to recommendation 8 states that "funding for COPS enhancements has been sourced and work commenced." In terms of those two responses, are these enhancements part of one large overhaul, or are there ongoing changes to individual sections?

Mr OWENS: It is really both. A large body of work went into the response to recommendation 8. FIMS, as it is called, the forensic information management system, has been funded to \$4.9 million for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 financial years, and that will cover a range from front of house to back of house. As that is occurring, other changes are being made to COPS as well. That is why the response is the same. While we are reducing break-and-enters, I know that I am reducing red tape, and COPS enhancement will be made there. We try to bundle them up as much as we can, because it is cost efficient. That means we are doing a number of enhancements as we go along. Some are finite dates, as with 2007-8 and 2008-09 for the FIM system. For others, as we get a group to come together and put the enhancements on, that is when they are done.

Mr GRANT McBRIDE: So that in terms of system upgrades, you are saying that at the moment you are bundling items together, and that you are aware that there is some funding for others at the moment?

Mr OWENS: Yes. What I have in front of me in respect of FIMS is that the tendering phase went out in July 2008, and that will be completed by February 2009. The initial implementation will incorporate job management, exhibit tracking, work flow and basic management reporting. It is expected to be completed on that system by mid to late 2009. That is in relation to recommendation 8 in particular.

CHAIR: You have enhancements to be made in the near future, but are you doing anything else in the meantime to implement that recommendation, or will you just wait till COPS has been enhanced?

Mr OWENS: In most of those we put up budget bids for the enhancements, and we are waiting on availability of the funding. We are waiting to hear back. Obviously, that is affected in the current climate, and we are just waiting to see what we get back, and then what we can do with the funding that is available.

CHAIR: So, for example, on making victims' reports collatable, if the funding is approved, then you will do that through COPS; but if not, you will look at doing it another way?

Mr OWENS: Yes.

Mr NINOS KHOSHABA: Earlier, in response to question 2 directed to the Deputy Commissioner, you mentioned that police generally give off-the-cuff advice to victims but that assessments are not always practicable, I guess due to resources. But would it be viable to give out brochures, or to have prepared brochures or packs that could be given to victims?

Mr OWENS: We do that, sir.

Mr NINOS KHOSHABA: Is that on the first occasion?

Mr OWENS: Absolutely. I speak from experience. I was commander at Maroubra in 2002, when it had a high prevalence of break-and-enters, and we used to do the packs then. We would come back to the station and mail them out to victims, saying, "We are following up on your break-and-enter, and we believe that this pack might assist us. If we can be of assistance, let us know." It is fairly self-explanatory. Most people go along and fill out the pack themselves, and then you make the choice that you would like. That does occur.

Mr NINOS KHOSHABA: Recommendation 1 is to review what information on burglaries should be collected and record whether or not the property has been burgled before. The NSW Police Force's initial response indicated that the Fundamental Response to Crime would be updated to accommodate this recommendation. Your recent submission states that the Fundamental Response to Crime is to be replaced by the State Plan and Non-State Plan Crime Reduction Guidelines. When will the State Plan and Non-State Plan Crime Reduction Guidelines be implemented? Secondly, will the guidelines specify the type of information to

be collected, including type of dwelling—for example, whether it is an apartment, semi or whatever—and the household composition, that is, the age, owner-occupier, et cetera?

Mr OWENS: I will abbreviate our response. The fundamental response has been replaced by the State Plan. The State Plan guidelines will go before my assistant commissioners and regional commanders on Monday. I have asked them to look at it, to give us feedback. I should have that feedback to Sean Hannen within a couple of weeks. Any amendments that we need to make should be in place and up and running, if I give myself two weeks, within a month. As for the nature of the premises and the age, that is all on the details that the police officer gets at the scene, which are the victim details. Then I understand you can search by block of units and dwelling type. You can already do that.

CHAIR: Citizens can, or you can?

Mr OWENS: No. We can.

CHAIR: How do you publish that?

Mr HANNEN: We do not publish it. We use it for intelligence purposes. It is contained within COPS and then used by intelligence analysts to determine patterns, modus operandi and that sort of thing.

CHAIR: And that will be reported to the Community Safety Precinct Committees?

Mr OWENS: Yes, it can. That is one area that it can be reported to. It is also reported through the new COMPAS-style formats, which are holding our commanders to account. That obviously will be: If the break-and-enters are prevalent in an area, what are you doing about them? Who are you targeting? Why are you targeting? And what are you doing for prevention? That is all part of that system.

CHAIR: So the whole of the responses indicate that you are modifying your Fundamental Response to Crime.

Mr OWENS: Yes, that is correct. Those will be the State Plan and the Non-State Plan Crime Reduction Guidelines, and that is what I have sent out to my region commanders. We have a two-monthly meeting, and that just happens to be next Monday and Tuesday. We are going to go through it in depth then. That is why I say we should have the feedback back to our planning within a month's time, if we have a two-week turnaround after that for any amendments and adjustments.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: The audit found that strategies to prevent household burglaries vary in quality between local area commands [LAC] and were not evaluated on effectiveness. Based on that, I am concerned that recommendation nine, "Develop guidelines to help commands judge whether a specialist break and enter team is needed based on risk" was rejected by the Police Force. Why do you consider that the determination of severity and incidents of break and enters to justify a specialist break and enter team is best left to the commanders? Why would guidelines not be of assistance to commanders in making those judgements, once again based on the fact that the Auditor-General found that strategies vary in quality between LACs and would not be evaluated?

Mr OWENS: Each local area command has a local proactive team, which they can dedicate to crimes within the area; for want of a better word, that can be a break and enter team if break and enters are consistently a problem in your area. But there is no need for me to dictate to a local area command, "Hey, you have a specialist gang of break and enter merchants running in your area, you need to have a proactive team." They will already have it up and running. Also, if it is on households or commercial premises, they can establish a taskforce with State crime and local detectives and go after those crooks. We do not need to permanently establish a break and enter team at local area commands if there is not a problem. You generally find that if a team or an individual decides to go and commit break and enters, they do them en masse. As soon as we start seeing a lot of spikes occurring, we go to our recent parolees released from jail. We have a look and ask who has moved into the area; who is out on bail. There is a whole range of checks and balances that already exist. So I do not see the need to be as prescriptive to say that you must have a break and enter team and this is the standard you must get to. If a commander feels that break and enters are his problem, he has the authority to formulate within his proactive team a break and enter proactive team: "This is what I want you to do." Generally you will find that that will encompass your drug addicts as well because in the majority of cases they will be committing the break and enters. So they are targeting both.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: I suppose my concern is that the audit identified that the strategies to prevent household burglaries vary in quality between LACs. Would you like to expand on that?

Mr OWENS: That is a fair comment. That is part of what COMPASS will overcome. That is an acronym.

Mr HANNEN: It is a command performance accountability system or process that we use to hold commanders to account. It is chaired by the commissioner and executive team and meets monthly on a regional basis. Basically, issues are identified and the commanders are asked questions about the nature of the problem and what they are going to do about it.

Mr OWENS: Some of it is the good and the bad. So, if you are doing very well in break and enters, it is a showcase to say what you are doing, how you are doing it, how you are recording it, how you are having such an effect. "Dave Owens, you need to speak with Adam because Adam is doing extremely well and we want you to incorporate on that." It is standardising across the board what we are doing already so that we bring everybody up to a base level. That is part of what we are doing. Whilst we are saying that you do not actually need a prescriptive document to do that, you should be doing it anyway as a commander. That is part of the showcasing within COMPASS.

CHAIR: Auditor-General, would you like to respond?

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: Yes. I accept that the local area commander is in the best position to determine whether a specialist break and enter team should be established. I accept also that in many cases it will not be warranted for various reasons and that the proactive team will be doing other things. My recommendation simply was that police head office set more guidelines or criteria for the local area commander to take into account when making that decision as to whether there should be a specialist team.

CHAIR: Did you find evidence that there was confusion?

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: We found that what we perceived as area commands that had similar risk profiles, one command made the call to have a specialist team and the other one would make the call not to have a specialist team. There may have been good reasons for that, but what we would like to see is some objective criteria that the commanders can consider when making that decision because in some areas where the break and enter crime rate was higher, they were the ones without a break and enter specialist team. There may be good reasons for that. What we are suggesting is that when the local area commander makes the call, he or she should have the benefit of some more objective guidelines.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: So the areas with the highest levels of break and enter did not have specialist teams?

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: We came across one local area command that had a higher level of break and enters than another one, and the one with the higher level did not have the specialist team. There may be good reasons for that, but we want to be more transparent so as to indicate why that was not the case.

Mr OWENS: Just picking up on that, we do have the formation of region enforcement squads as well. They are regionally based and all of the LACs have contributed to them. They can be asked to assist on a priority basis through risk assessments: "We need X amount of staff to come into our area specifically to target pawn shops, break and enter merchants." So, they have that available. Whilst the commander might say, "I have my proactive team doing drugs at the moment. They are chasing up the offenders, they are doing all of that, I need the assistance of region enforcement squads," the region commander will say, "Yes. No issues with that at all." So whilst it may not show that they have a break and enter police team working in there, they do by the region enforcement squad. They are available in all three of the metro areas to come across and assist.

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: Just to support that, on page 27 of our report the deputy commissioner has referred to specialist versus shared teams. You can see in the Wagga region where there are 1,000 break and enters at the time there was a specialist team, whereas in the Newcastle region where there were 1,600 break and enters and there was not a specialist team. It was more of a shared team along the lines indicated. What we are recommending is that there be centralised guidelines to explain the differences.

CHAIR: So it is simply a case that you can see evidence of break and enter, yet no evidence of a break and enter specialist unit, but given what the Deputy Commissioner said about local knowledge and skills—

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: Absolutely.

CHAIR: Do you doubt that they have the capacity to make a judgement call?

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: I am not suggesting that. The raw figures do not necessarily determine whether you need to have a specialist team. There would be a lot of other factors to determine the risk profile of that region. I agree that the local area commander would be in the best position to be aware of those factors. All we are suggesting is that head office gives some more objective guidelines for the local area commander to take into account. The local area commander may still make the same decision, but if he or she is aware of these guidelines it will just make it a little more transparent.

CHAIR: Are you aware of guidelines in other areas of crime?

Mr ACHTERSTRAAT: I am not aware.

CHAIR: Deputy Commissioner, do you want to add anything further to recommendation nine?

Mr OWENS: No.

Mr NINOS KHOSHABA: You mentioned earlier that, obviously, some signals exist with regards to solving some of these crimes, the break and enters. Is there a uniform process throughout all commands? You mentioned earlier how police will generally find out who has moved into the area, who is on bail, and you talked about pawn shops. Are these processes uniform within all commands or is it again just only with the local area commander?

Mr OWENS: It depends on the volume that comes through. Is there a necessity? One local area command might have five follow-ups for DNA hits, other ones might have 30 or 40. Obviously, they would find the need to put in a team to follow that. Is there a checklist to go through?

Mr NINOS KHOSHABA: Yes, exactly.

Mr OWENS: No, but most commanders already would have those in place. Just over the weekend we found our numbers are fairly high in relation to warrants, DNA and stuff like that. So what we said is, okay, let us go out and literally attack it over a three-day period. Over a three-day period we locked up 812 people. Then we realise that 182 of them are on warrants, 84 are on DNA, and 119 are on "wanted arrest", which means they have already committed a crime—more than one crime, I would say—so we take them out of circulation.

It depends on whether you have a pawn shop in your area. Without naming the individual LACs, we have one LAC that has a very high incidence of robberies and break and enters at the moment. They found that visiting their repeat offenders was not working, but visiting the neighbour's repeat offenders is really working because they are the ones who come across the border. So it is a matter of joining up a number of LACs to address those crimes, and they might have pawn shops.

We try not to be too prescriptive to the commanders, because we want them to be inventive and we want them to use the staff's lateral thinking: "Go and do it. If we have done it this way all the time, there is nothing to say we cannot do it a little bit differently, to lock up people and to stop them committing those offences."

Mr NINOS KHOSHABA: I agree with what you are saying, but I assume you would have some kind of checklist as well.

Mr OWENS: There are guidelines to it. But, again, each individual area is different.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: Deputy Commissioner, in my electorate I have found, and from talking to my colleagues they have found, that the whole Neighbourhood Watch system, which was so successful for so many years, seems to have fallen over to a great extent, for a number of reasons. Is the New South Wales Police

Force based on people looking after their neighbours and keeping an eye out for things? Are we looking at perhaps bringing a Neighbourhood Watch system back, or at least resourcing it?

Mr WHYTE: We still support Neighbourhood Watch, but we have taken it a step further into the community safety precincts and invited all those groups that were still active in Neighbourhood Watch, to bring them into the groups and into areas where it was not active. We have gone out into the community to invite those community members that would not normally have participated in Neighbourhood Watch to bring them into the community safety precincts fold. The whole concept of community safety is to look at it on a multilevel. It is a little more involved than the former Neighbourhood Watch program. It incorporates not only Neighbourhood Watch but what is going on in the CBD areas of each of the towns and suburbs. So it takes it a step further, but it is very much still a supported program within NSW Police.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS: What I am saying is that Neighbourhood Watch is no longer Neighbourhood Watch. I am aware that it has been taken out of the neighbourhood. One of the major issues is that it no longer serves the neighbourhood purpose of looking after streets and surrounding homes, and keeping an eye out; it has been removed from that. To a great extent, that takes the community involvement or community power out of it. I raise the issue, particularly regarding prevention more than anything else, and whether it is possible to resource it further so that it comes back into the community.

Mr OWENS: In some areas I guess it worked extremely well, where it would only take a couple of really dedicated individuals who would drive everyone else in the street. What we are trying to do is to get that enthusiasm into the safety precincts, but to get them some resourcing as well. When we start opening up some channels to them, we say, "Perhaps you would like something sent out with the council newsletter", or "Perhaps you would like the little things done", which would free up these people's time. We want to harness those individuals' enthusiasm—because it is gold—into giving them some resources through other areas, and that is part of what we have done. We also have to recognise that some communities are changing. Some people do not know their neighbours; they have never spoken to them. So we have to look at both sides. We are very happy to harness those people, and that is why we are desperately trying to get them on board.

Mr RUSSELL TURNER: Deputy Commissioner, I take you to recommendation 6, which deals with forensic evidence and the standard operating procedures. When should a forensic officer attend and assess a break and enter scene? Do you have to get to a number of points in order to send someone out?

Mr OWENS: I guess it is more a question of what has happened that would prevent us from coming out—for example, if this scene is contaminated. If the individual does not want us to attend—which surprises me—that would be more an exclusion. A sample of the questions is, "How did they get in? Did they touch something, do you think? Is there a cigarette there?" They will say, "Yes." Then we will say, "Okay, I will come out and have an assessment of it." There are not that many barriers to getting the forensic scene of crime officers to collect the forensic samples; it is more exclusion that we are finding, such as, unfortunately, the scene is contaminated.

Mr RUSSELL TURNER: Does every command have forensic scene of crime officers?

Mr OWENS: Yes, every command is serviced by scene of crime officers. If there is an armed robbery with violence, our forensic people then come out. As the violence escalates, we get in different experts. But every local area command has access to forensic officers.

Mr RUSSELL TURNER: The local area command forensic officers would be the first port of call for burglaries?

Mr OWENS: It depends. If they ring the Police Assistance Line, they will run them through a series of questions. It is then sent to the local area command and put on a work schedule for the scene of crime officer to go out there. If someone really wants someone to come and do an analysis, we will go and do it.

Mr RUSSELL TURNER: Unfortunately, in my electorate I am often told that the police would not come out. As you said, an assessment may have been made that the scene was contaminated. There has certainly been a communication breakdown in that area. However, that is not what we are talking about today. The report shows a large variation between the rate of attendance of forensic officers—a 93 per cent attendance at Newcastle and about a 32 per cent attendance at the scenes in Lachlan. Is there a reason for that? Is it budgetary reasons? Perhaps the local area command is some distance from Lachlan.

Mr OWENS: Yes, distance is a factor, and overall assessment. But, as I said, if there is the possibility of getting DNA fingerprint forensic samples, we certainly will get an officer to attend. That may not be the same response you get within the Sydney metropolitan area; they might have to wait a day, and some people decide it is not worth it, whereas others say they would still like someone to attend.

Mr RUSSELL TURNER: Do you have a procedure to reassure people? I accept that break and enters happen and the perpetrator disappears. But in the mind of the householder, the perpetrator is still around the corner waiting to hit them with a baseball bat. Do you have a procedure whereby you reassure people, particularly elderly people, "We will be there, but for certain reasons we cannot get there until such and such a date"?

Mr OWENS: It depends who they ring. Through the Police Assistance Line, they are very good because they do that en masse all the time. If they ring a local area command, they get the reassurance as well. Particularly the elderly—I do not think you will find many police officers that will not go out of their way to assist and reassure the elderly.

CHAIR: Gentlemen, would you like to make any closing remarks?

Mr OWENS: No.

CHAIR: Thank you for your time today. You have certainly covered all the areas we had queries about, and we thank you for taking the time to participate in this process. The Public Accounts Committee is serious about following up on all Auditor-General performance audits. We think that 12 months afterwards is a good time frame. Please let us know if you think that that time frame is too short or too long. Certainly from this audit and the responses you have provided, it appears that 12 months is about the right period. Thank you for your attendance today.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 3.40 p.m.)