

CASE HISTORY



Date:	8 TH JUNE 2004	Ref:	UK-001
Title:	New device aims to combat rising fear of crime		
Subject:	Product launch		

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Local authorities and crime prevention groups within the UK public sector are being offered a new approach to community security – the first electronic version of the Neighbourhood Watch concept.

The 'AlertBox' device is a robust box – about the size of a paperback book – which allows neighbours to send each other simple messages of warning or requests for help. Run on mains electricity or batteries, it is operated by pressing a single button – ideal for the elderly or those nervous of technology.

The new security product, which has been welcomed by Neighbourhood Watch and the police, makes ingenious, secure use of state-of-the-art radio technologies to connect neighbours on an AlertBox 'network' instantly, should there be a problem or concern in their local area. It is ideal as a community-wide solution – as each person must have their own AlertBox – and it ties in with a renewed vigour in the public sector to offer neighbourhood solutions.

Useful as a crime prevention device, as neighbours can alert each other to nuisance callers or suspicious individuals in the vicinity, it also has the potential to save lives. In the event of needing to dial 999 because of an accident, fire, illness or intrusion, the ability to summon a neighbour could make all the difference in the time it takes for the emergency services to arrive.

A number of police forces, housing associations and local councils are already assessing the device as a means of combating not only crime itself but also the paralysing and often disproportionate fear of crime, which is crippling communities.

The London Borough of Barnet is running a three-month trial with elderly and vulnerable people. Paul Hammond, director of Boroughwatch – an independent charitable organisation that sits in the local Partnership – is coordinating the scheme on behalf of Barnet.

"The public is suffering from a loss of confidence, which is helping criminals," said Hammond. "Giving people a sense of empowerment by harnessing the latest

technologies is a great step forward to creating more secure neighbourhoods – both practically and psychologically.

“Our number one aim is to reduce the fear of crime and we feel confident that AlertBox will be a useful tool to help us achieve that. While we must wait until the end of the three month trial to give our final assessment, AlertBox has already been used successfully in action to alert the community to some worrying noise and disturbance by some youths.”

The launch of AlertBox to the public sector follows a Home Office report on crime in the UK ¹ which showed that the fear of crime is far worse than the fact. While the report showed that the crime rate had actually dropped 17 per cent since 1999, most people (73 per cent) perceived it to be rising.

Nigel Davies, marketing director, Neighbourhood Watch, said: “We’re all for the development of products such as AlertBox. Anything that helps neighbourhoods become more actively connected will help to engender closer, safer, more peaceful communities. Some Neighbourhood Watch groups are trialling AlertBox at the moment and the National Neighbourhood Watch Association looks forward to seeing how it is received by our members.”

Peter Harris, managing director, AlertBox said: “AlertBox – like Neighbourhood Watch itself – is not an alternative to emergency services, but it does offer valuable back-up and peace of mind. Knowing that all you have to do is press one button to alert your neighbours to a nuisance caller or suspicious person or to call for help, is something that vulnerable people, such as the elderly or those who live alone, will really value.”

AlertBox has been designed specifically to be incredibly simple to use. Each box is pre-programmed with the user’s details, so there is no set-up to be done. A clear display shows exactly who a message is from and when it was sent and the user has a choice of two buttons – warning or help. Once pressed, the message will go out to all AlertBoxes in the neighbourhood within an effective range of around 100 metres. The user has the option of sending more detailed messages if desired, but this is not necessary for the AlertBox to work efficiently.

AlertBox-networked communities will also benefit from eye-catching posters and stickers, which will work as a deterrent to nuisances or criminals.

^[1] Home Office Statistical Bulletin: ‘Crime in England and Wales’, published July 2003. Further information available at: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm