

CASE HISTORY



Date:	31 st August 2004	Ref:	UK-002
Title:	Welsh valleys look to technology to tackle social problems		
Subject:	Innovative uses for AlertBox		

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A school in Rhondda Cynon Taf, Wales, is using an innovative new safety device to protect a child whose parent has threatened to snatch the youngster on their release from prison.

An 'AlertBox' has been installed in the child's classroom, which is radio-linked to another in the secretary's office. Should the teacher be at all concerned, she can press a button on the box discreetly, which will immediately transmit a 'help' message to the secretary.

A high-tech version of Neighbourhood Watch, AlertBox is a robust box – about the size of a paperback book – which allows neighbours or members of a community such as a school or other institution, to send each other simple messages of warning or requests for help. Run on mains electricity or batteries and using ingenious, secure state-of-the-art digital radio technology, it is operated by pressing a single button.

The boxes are completely portable and will work within a radius of about 100 metres so a teacher also carries one in the playground at breaktime.

The new 'AlertBoxes' have been supplied to the school by the local Community Safety Partnership, which has adopted the newly launched technology as part of its armoury against anti-social and criminal behaviour.

One of the first local authorities to trial the AlertBoxes, which have been described as 'Neighbourhood Watch in a box', Rhondda Cynon Taf has also placed two devices in a local Magistrate's Court. One AlertBox has been given to Victim Support, which links to another office in the building. Victims giving evidence in a trial are vulnerable to harassment – or worse – and can even be threatened within the Magistrate's building.

Tony Key, OBE, Community Safety Officer, Rhondda Cynon Taf said: "We had a situation where there was one woman Victim Support Officer in a remote room without a phone, making her feel very vulnerable. The AlertBox means she just has to press one button to summon assistance.

A surgery in Cynon Valley is also benefiting from the trial. The medical staff there deals regularly with patients with drug and alcohol abuse problems, who can sometimes become threatening and violent.

Area Crime Watch co-ordinator, Carl Harris, who is one of only three full-time staff employed by a Community Safety Partnership in Wales, says that alcohol is the biggest social problem the area faces.

"We put an AlertBox behind the front desk at the surgery and one in each consulting room. If a patient starts to get aggressive, usually the appearance of a couple more people will calm the situation down," explained Harris, a retired company sergeant major with the British Army.

Roger Hughes, another Area Crime Watch co-ordinator for Rhondda Cynon Taf, who retired from police work in 2002, said: "The beauty of these new AlertBoxes is that they can help prevent a crime before it happens. It also gives important reassurance to residents and gives them that 'feel safe factor' that just allows them to sleep well at night.

As Crime Watch co-ordinators, Harris and Hughes are responsible for encouraging and helping to resource local Neighbourhood Watch groups. In one year alone, the team has increased the number of Neighbourhood Watch groups in the area by 94 per cent, covering 31,500 homes and 70,000 people.

"This is an area that has experienced a lot of deprivation. From once being an incredibly close-knit community, which was almost self-policing, we now have fear of crime at night," said Hughes. "However, the situation is improving tremendously as we work to get that community feeling back into the area."

"We have given a couple of trial AlertBoxes to a very active Neighbourhood Watch group run by ladies who are mostly aged over 70. They run a small community centre backing on to a park, which gets quite a lot of 'youth activity'. Anyone using the centre, who is worried by noises outside perhaps, can summon help from a neighbour by pressing the red button on the AlertBox. It makes them feel much more secure."

Tony Key said: "AlertBoxes are particularly useful for areas such as Rhondda Cynon Taf where residences are spread over wide and often rugged areas. Because AlertBox links neighbours together using reliable digital radio technology, help can be summoned from close by to assist or even stop the situation. Much of our task is about reassuring the community and AlertBox is a valuable piece of that picture."