Building Safer Communities in the London Borough of Southwark

Case Study

Peckham Business Partnership's initiative to reduce crime and the fear of crime using AlertBox technology

Contents

"At no other time has concern for security in our communities been greater. Hardly a day passes without the Government being called upon to respond to ever increasing levels of public anxiety"

<div align="right">

Tony Jackson CBE, Chairman of AlertBox Ltd

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Introduction

In a project combining modern technology with simple public initiative, positive steps are being taken in Southwark to build safer communities. This document describes the project and the role played by AlertBox technology.

Building safer neighbourhoods in Southwark

The London Borough of Southwark has a long term objective to create safer neighbourhoods. High-level strategies for making communities safer, as set out by the Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government, include:

- Engaging the community
- Providing a visible policing presence
- Improving communication between police and public
- Providing better information about community safety
- Increasing voluntary involvement in policing

Key performance indicators

The government has set key performance indicators for local crime reduction partnerships. These indicators measure:

- The requirement for community engagement, such as Police Community Support Officers' hours of visible patrol
- Total crime recorded, including domestic burglary, violent crime and vehicle crimes
- Communication and cooperation between authorities and the community
- Reporting on crime and the proceeds of crime, public disorder and anti-social behaviour, and breach of ASBO
- Detection rates
- The number of offences brought to justice

There are crime reduction projects across the borough of Southwark, all with similar objectives around creating safer communities. This document looks at how Peckham, one area within the borough, has built successful, sustainable partnerships between the police, local authorities and the communities using AlertBox technology.

Background: the Peckham economy

Peckham town centre has more than 400 retail businesses and three market clusters. It is a 24-hour economy, with both day time and night time businesses. The area experiences a high proportion of serious and petty crime, including:

- shoplifting
- street crime (robbery and pick pocketing)
- illegal trading
- graffiti
- abuse and hate crimes
- littering and fly tipping.

The local community in Peckham has social and cultural characteristics which can lead to further challenges:

- social exclusion
- multi-faith
- multi-cultural
- social deprivation
- high public perception of crime
- poor reporting of crime.

The Peckham Business Partnership comprises the police, the local council and Peckham Town Centre Management Group (PTCMG) which represents the local trading and business community. AlertBox technology was introduced to the partnership by Southwark police, which led to a successful evaluation.

The success of the evaluation led to an expanding deployment of AlertBox networks, the effects of which are described in this document.

Shared aims: AlertBox and crime reduction partnerships

The aims of AlertBox communities (listed below) align closely with those of crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs).

- Reduce crime and the fear of crime.
- Promote community awareness.
- Raise vigilance levels.
- Improve witness power.
- Reassure and empower local communities.
- Promote sustainable partnerships.
- Engage members of the community with PCSOs and community wardens.
- Aid regeneration and improve the local economy.
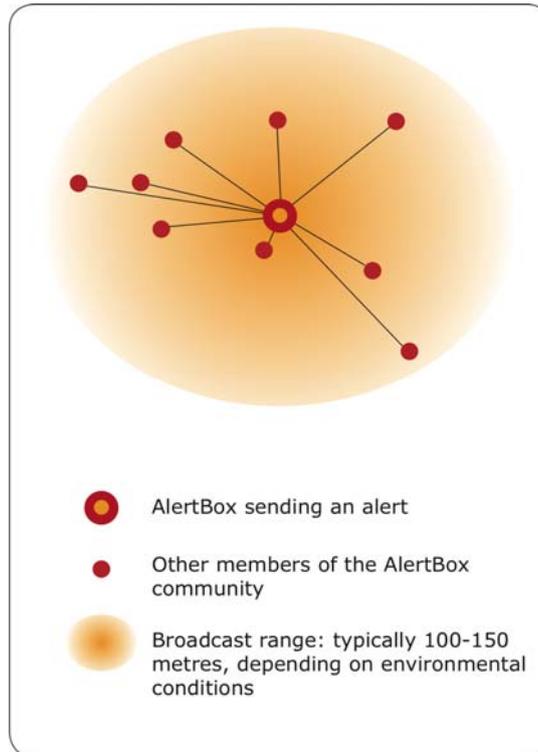
What is AlertBox?

AlertBox is a wireless messaging device that connects people in business or residential premises (see figure 1). It can broadcast warning or emergency messages to nearby units at the press of a button (see figure 2) and has been described as "the electronic version of Neighbourhood Watch".

Figure 1: An AlertBox unit

The units are robust, simple to use and require no configuration by the user. Installation consists only of plugging the unit into the mains.

Each AlertBox is programmed with the user's name, address and telephone number and keeps a log of all events: if a warning is sent, an exact and reliable record of the event – including the date and time - is kept. The boxes are accountable, with the ability to upload logs to a personal computer to assist in identifying trends in crime activity. This can help PCSOs allocate their resources effectively.

Figure 2: An AlertBox network

- A broadcast warning message raises vigilance and awareness **before** a possible incident takes place. Typical examples include bogus callers, counterfeit money, suspected theft or antisocial behaviour.

- In an emergency, a broadcast message brings assistance from neighbours within seconds, and generates extra witness potential for the emergency services if necessary. Typical examples include attempted break-ins, fire or medical problems.

The value of AlertBox networks can be increased by using them in conjunction with a related service called AlertPartner.
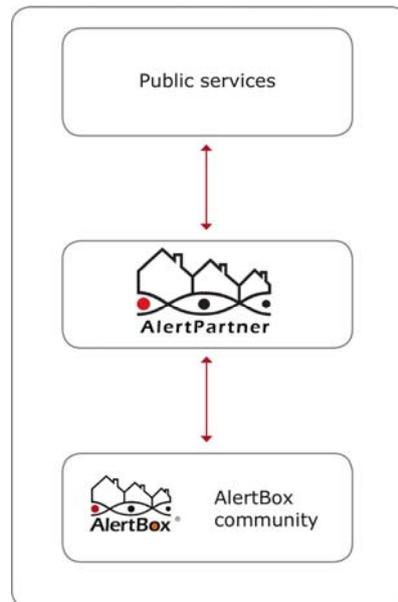
What is AlertPartner?

AlertPartner is a web based tool for establishing and managing AlertBox networks.

As well as administering an AlertBox network, AlertPartner provides a 2-way messaging system between the police, local authorities, and local community groups using SMS (mobile phone text message), or e-mail.

The tool can be configured to match the needs of each AlertBox network, and allows different levels of administrator access.

Members of the public can apply through community web sites to be registered on AlertPartner. Applicants can then be approved by a designated moderator.

It is also compatible with some geographic information systems, enabling administrators to produce detailed reports of activities in their areas.

Figure 3: An AlertPartner network

The Peckham crime reduction partnership

The Peckham Business Partnership was formed following the success of an initial AlertBox project. The partnership consists of the police, the local authority and the Peckham Town Centre Management Group:
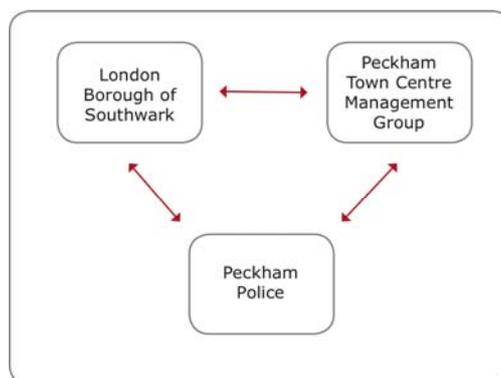

Figure 4: The Peckham Business Partnership (AlertBox administration team)

Increasing community engagement

With the introduction of AlertBox, members of the community gain a new channel of communication. Better communication leads to stronger relationships between neighbours, particularly in a community like Peckham where there is a transient population and a high proportion of people for whom English is a second language.

AlertBox users are issued with window stickers which provide a catalyst for ad-hoc meetings between Community Wardens or PCSOs and members of the AlertBox community, as well as providing a deterrent to would-be troublemakers and reassurance to the wider community. Help is only seconds away.

Figure 5: AlertBox window sticker

The Peckham Business Partnership is considering the use of road signage to denote areas where the system is in use:
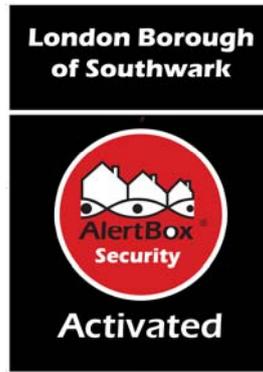
Figure 6: AlertBox roadside notice

Further effects of deploying an AlertBox network are listed below.

- Promotes an ethos of self-help amongst individuals within the community.
- Provides an early warning system, preventing crime by alerting people **before** an incident takes place.
- Promotes engagement and cooperation with the authorities.
- Educates people on best practice towards personal safety.
- Generates witness potential.

Empowering people to help themselves

The extra communication AlertBox provides means community members can respond to crime positively. Becoming a member of an AlertBox community empowers them to become an active part of the crime prevention process (see figure 7), instead of feeling disconnected from it.
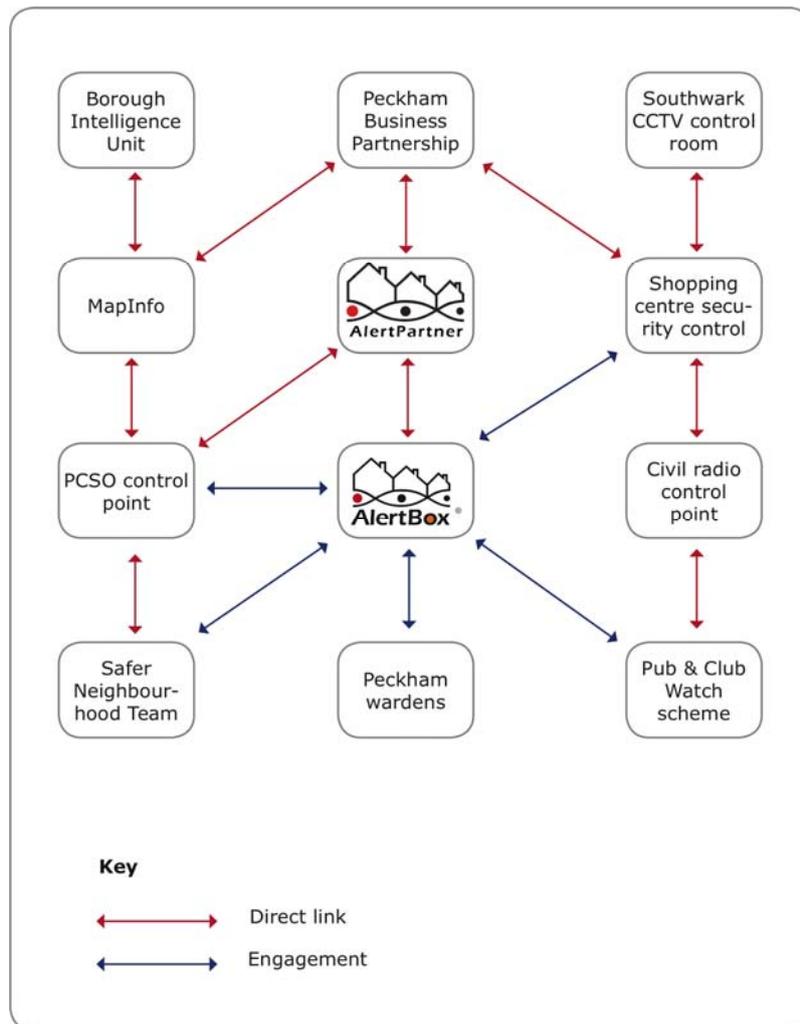
Figure 7: The Peckham Business Partnership and public services with AlertBox and AlertPartner

The simple act of becoming a member of the network - even if you never have to use your AlertBox - makes you feel more secure.

At the time of writing there are ten AlertBox projects in the borough of Southwark, connecting nearly 500 people. This includes one residential pilot project which networks at least 30 people at home. AlertBox communities keep growing because, as more people see the benefits, more want to join.

Expansion potential

Once a network is established, it can easily be expanded. To join, a new member has simply to plug their pre-configured AlertBox into the power supply. As soon as it is plugged in, all the other AlertBoxes on the network recognise the new member and configure themselves automatically to include it.

Sustainability

When people feel closer to their neighbours and are able to communicate with them, a long term sense of community is built. If a person moves out of the area, it is easy to reprogram a unit with the new details. There are no ongoing costs associated with running an AlertBox unit and information gathered from the network can be used to help form local strategies.

There is a displacement effect, with criminals avoiding those areas where a project is running.

Results

The Peckham Business Partnership has spearheaded best-practice principles which are now being adopted throughout the borough. Figure 8 shows some of the areas of benefit for the groups involved in the project.
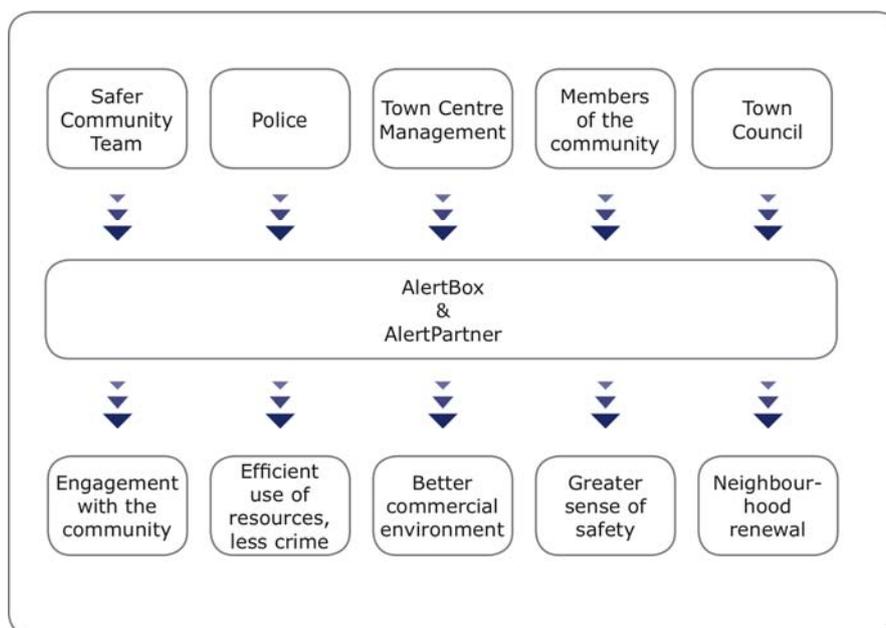

Figure 8: Benefits for community groups

Community benefits

The primary function of the concept is to reduce crime and the fear of crime by giving traders the ability to send warning messages. This creates an environment in which crime is difficult to commit. The emergency function sends an immediate call for help to neighbours who are only seconds away.

In a presentation to the Safer Southwark Partnership Crime Seminar (February, 2006), Borough Commander Ian Thomas said that AlertBox networks had reduced incidents of shoplifting and theft in two areas over a six month period by 34% and 24% respectively.

The deterrent value has been increased by using shop window stickers. These advertised the presence of security devices on the premises and raised awareness of the network.

The well publicised fact that help is only seconds away reduces both crime and the fear of crime. Given the ability to send warning or emergency messages, people feel secure where they may previously have felt isolated and vulnerable.

Because the scheme is highly visible, it reassures the law-abiding public that its community is being made safer.

Promotes community awareness

Installing AlertBoxes in commercial premises around Peckham has increased co-operation between the traders and law-enforcement agencies.

The scheme promotes a sense of belonging and discourages division, or a 'them and us' situation; members of the public are more likely to support the work of the police and PCSOs.

Improves witness power

Members of an AlertBox community provide better quality information to the police. This contributes to improved detection rates and more effective allocation of police resources.

Logs from AlertBoxes can be downloaded to a computer running AlertPartner to generate accurate reports which help to answer the questions, "Who? What? and When?" in relation to an incident. The system allows detailed incident profiling.

There is also greater witness information. The Peckham project has proved that emergency messages produce a very good response from neighbours and fellow traders, with assistance and as witnesses.

Improves visibility and perception

An AlertBox community has high visibility, improving the perception of the town centre as a safe place to shop during the day. A similar improvement is made to the night time economy, with residents and traders feeling more secure.

The recognition effect is twofold: as well as helping law-abiding people feel safe, criminals know that the area is not a soft target.

Assists regeneration

Lower crime levels, good perception and high levels of community engagement make it more realistic to promote Peckham as a thriving and safe economy.

The effect of positive messages, instead of negative press, is to:

- Create a town centre that attracts more visitors, shoppers and tourists.
- Attract private investment into businesses and house building.
- Stimulate the local economy.

Engages the community; promotes cohesion

By providing the community with a self-help tool, AlertBox empowers people to become part of the crime prevention process. Before, they were likely to have adopted a more passive attitude to crime, over-reliant on the police and local authority 'spoon-feeding' measures.

The sense of community leads to better interaction with the police, PCSOs and other crime reduction bodies. Improved communication with the police can have many potential benefits, ranging from better information to better community relations and improved recruitment possibilities.

Because an AlertBox community does not rely on any single initiative, project or person, there is more chance of a sustained community improvement. The involvement of several bodies, down to community level, brings a strong momentum and continuity to the project.

In the short term, the technology is simple to deploy and a provides a good response to immediate pressures. It is a good answer to the common question, "What is being done?"

In the longer term it helps to generate a new mindset, where people realise they can (and should) help to prevent crime by being vigilant, supportive and proactive in their communities. The new mindset contributes to the sustainability of safer neighbourhoods.

What the people involved think

"From the outset of the Peckham Business Partnership, lone traders have felt part of a town centre community. The growth of the PBP has helped to strengthen and galvanise the relationships between the Council, Police and the traders. The future of the PBP is sustainable as long as the fear of crime exists, which is unfortunately always present in today's society."

David Strevens
Town Centre Manager
Peckham Programme, Southwark Council

"AlertBox has proved its worth in assisting to reduce crime and reducing the fear of crime. It has helped to set up a sustainable business watch community which is led by the local business community."

Stephen Morris
Crime Prevention Officer
Metropolitan Police

"I am no longer scared to come to work - I know that when I press a button neighbours will come to help."

Marielyne Nozarick
Employee
Rex Laundrette

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