

Inventor's gadget box alerts neighbourhoods to criminals

By Rohit Jaggi, Social Affairs Correspondent

Published: August 11 2004 05:00 | Last updated: August 11 2004 05:00

You can usually tell when an area has suffered a spate of burglaries or car break-ins. The local pub is full of people going on about how this could not have happened in the good old days.

But instead of getting beerily misty-eyed, one entrepreneur dreamed up a gizmo he hopes will yoke people's community spirit in a way that can cut down both fear of crime and crime itself.

Reading-based entrepreneur Peter Harris's AlertBox is a high-tech version of Neighbourhood Watch that allows people instantly to alert those around them to the presence of shady characters or dodgy goings-on.

Mr Harris came up with the idea three years ago when a suspicious-looking character turned up at his door ostensibly selling fish. The man could have been casing homes as potential targets for burglary, Mr Harris feared - and he wanted to warn his neighbours, too. "I thought: 'there must be a device where you can press a button and alert everyone in the vicinity'," he recalled.

But finding that no such device existed, he set out to invent one.

He came up with the AlertBox, a portable digital radio transmitter/receiver operating on 433.9mHz, a licence-free frequency, in a box about the size of a paperback novel. The device can flash an alert to other AlertBoxes within about 100 metres at the push of a button. "What we wanted is something an 80-year-old technophobe could use," Mr Harris said.

But the drawback is that, like a Neighbourhood Watch scheme, the system relies on a critical mass of people opting into it. At about £125 per unit, price is an issue.

Of the AlertBox clusters set up so far, most have been funded by local authorities, Neighbourhood Watch schemes or government urban renewal funds. Police forces like the devices because they can mean fewer call-outs to incidents where they would have arrived too late or would have been unable to do anything constructive.

Meanwhile Mr Harris hopes that the system will work principally as a deterrent.