

# INSTALLING ALLEY-GATES: PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM BURGLARY PREVENTION PROJECTS

## Briefing Note 2/01

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### Introduction

Alley-gating, the installation of security gates across footpath and alleyways, is a form of situational crime prevention that attempts to reduce the opportunity to commit crimes such as domestic burglary. When installed and properly used, alley-gates should control access to vulnerable target areas – usually paths or alleys at the rear and to the sides of houses. Although there are good reasons for thinking that alley-gates should reduce burglary, there is as yet little hard evidence that they do. This will be available later in the year when evaluations of projects funded by the Crime Reduction Programme report their findings. In the interim, however, the promise of alley-gating is enough to persuade many partnerships and local authorities that they are worth installing. This briefing note therefore provides guidance on the practical issues that must be addressed when considering alley-gating.

The guidance that follows is based on preliminary findings from projects funded under the Reducing Burglary Initiative (RBI) in the North West and North East of England. Many of the lessons included here also come from other non-RBI-funded projects that have had experience of implementing alley-gates.



Picture courtesy of Selly Oak SDP, West Midlands

### Benefits of an alley-gate

#### *Reducing burglary*

Results from the 1998 British Crime Survey<sup>1</sup> showed that 55% of burglaries with entry occurred through the rear in terraced and detached/semi-detached houses. Moreover, an analysis of recorded crime data for the county of Merseyside shows that this pattern is particularly evident for terraced housing, with entry being gained via the rear of the property for around 72% of burglaries. The implication of such findings is that in theory, by restricting access to the rear of properties, alley-gating should have a very significant effect on burglary, although there are as yet no impact evaluations of alley-gating schemes available.

An evaluation of the impact of alley-gating on crime reduction, being conducted by a team from Liverpool University as part of the Home Office RBI, is currently underway. Early indications from two of the projects that installed alley-gates are that there has been a reduction in burglary rates in the target areas. Further analysis is however being undertaken.

#### *Reducing fear of crime*

Informal interviews conducted in Liverpool suggest that once gates were installed, residents said they felt more comfortable walking in the alleys - and this in turn leads to the added benefit of increasing informal surveillance (more people are outside who can act as guardians and look-outs for others). There is also an increased sense of ownership of these secured areas by the local residents.

#### *Reducing arson attempts*

Another benefit of the schemes is to decrease the opportunity of setting fires to rubbish bags piled up in rear alleyways. Residents in one Liverpool estate were faced with the misfortune of regularly having their refuse

<sup>1</sup> Budd, T. (1999) *Burglary of Domestic Dwellings: Findings from the British Crime Survey*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 4/99

bags set on fire. When the alley-gates were installed however, the potential for such fires was reduced.

#### *Increasing community involvement*

Organising an alley-gating scheme will often involve establishing a consultation team who will arrange meetings with local residents to discuss the details of the project. The very fact that people are brought together in these meetings may lead to their increased involvement in the neighbourhood and a greater sense of community spirit and ownership. This benefit was experienced by local residents living in one of the neighbourhoods involved in the Liverpool alley-gating project.

#### *Improving the environment*

Installing alley-gates may facilitate the process of 'beautification' in the area. In a number of residential areas in Manchester where alley-gates have been installed, residents were able to make considerable improvements in the aesthetic appearance of their alleyways. They installed trellises and hanging baskets, and planted flowers and shrubs, which increased their pride in their neighbourhood. The alleys became cleaner and less cluttered, and developed into safer play areas for children. Similar results have also been observed in Liverpool although it is still early days for these particular schemes.

### **Gaining consent**

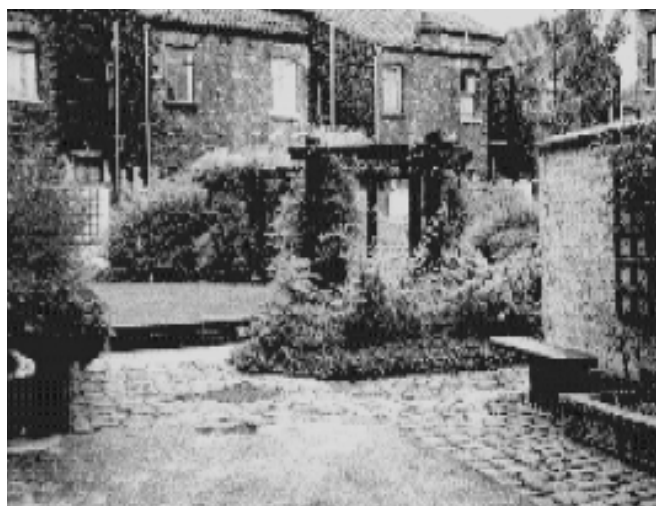
One of the first steps that should be taken when starting an alley-gating scheme is to establish a team who will oversee the consultation process with local residents and homeowners. The evaluation found that using a Home Watch or Residents group already formed in the area helped to accelerate this process. Meetings with homeowners and residents to explain the scheme and its intended outcomes were important – people are more likely to volunteer for a cause that they know will benefit them directly.

#### *Obtaining legal consent from homeowners*

In planning gates that will close access to alleyways, there is a legal 'duty of care' to conduct a comprehensive consultation with all homeowners and residents who will be affected by the gates, and to secure written consent from them.



Picture of Manchester courtesy of Safer Terraces Project, Liverpool



Picture of Manchester courtesy of Safer Terraces Project, Liverpool

#### *Consultation with local residents*

The consultation process may take some time to complete. For example, the Liverpool project workers estimated that the process could take at least twelve months. Obviously, there will be no prescribed period for this process – situations will vary. The project workers had to visit home-owners on several occasions (during the day and evening, as well as over the weekend) in order to provide them with the necessary information about the gates, and attempting to convince them of the benefits installing the gates could provide them.

It may also be necessary to work with individual groups in order to address their specific concerns.

#### *Identifying homeowners*

One of the main obstacles found to hinder the progress of installing alley-gates is the inability to identify the landlords and/or homeowners of the properties that will be affected by the gates. Even if these individuals are identified, it may not be easy to contact them. Where properties are privately rented, the landlord may not be living in the house and in many situations, may not be living in the same city or country as the property. The tenants of these properties may not feel that they can give permission for the gates to be installed without first contacting the landlord. It may therefore be necessary to undertake a time-consuming process of tracking down the landlord before installation can begin.



Picture courtesy of Selly Oak SDP, West Midlands

A project run in Liverpool found that in 90% of cases, tenants were able to supply their landlords' contact details. In situations where it was difficult to reach the landlords by phone, the team left information about the scheme with the tenant to pass on to the landlord, as well as leaving their own telephone numbers and stamped addressed envelopes. This method worked for this particular project in securing the consent of homeowners.

#### *Inaccurate perceptions*

A number of schemes have found that one of the major reasons that homeowners object to the scheme is because they have an inaccurate perception of how the installation of alley-gates will affect them. For example, in Liverpool they found that many homeowners in end houses were reluctant to give their support. These residents felt that the installation of gates would cause a number of problems. First, that the noise of the gates opening and closing would disturb them. Second, that other residents would leave bags of rubbish behind the gate throughout the week, rather than waiting until the day the waste disposal teams were due to collect them, and thirdly that the installation of the gates would cause structural damage to their property. The project workers believed that it took seven times longer to secure the consent of these residents than those who lived elsewhere along the alley. However, once their concerns had been addressed, for instance by telling them that the gate locking mechanism would be fitted with rubber mouldings to dampen the noise, the homeowners who had initially objected to the scheme finally gave their consent. For this reason, it is important that homeowners are supplied with comprehensive information about the schemes at an early stage of the consultation process, before such problems materialise.



Picture courtesy of Selly Oak SDP, West Midlands

#### *Consultation meetings*

Once all of the relevant parties have been contacted, project managers found it useful to hold several meetings with them. These were used to answer questions and address the concerns homeowners had. This was also a good opportunity to get local residents and homeowners to sign formally a document that showed that they agreed to the gates being installed

and that they fully supported the scheme. Such 'contracts' can be used as evidence if the alley-gating scheme is subsequently contested.

#### *Periods of due notice*

'Due notice' must be given to all home-owners before a project can proceed – this means that each resident and home-owner should be contacted well in advance of the gates being installed. This process may need to take the form of a registered letter explaining the scheme and what is required of the owner.

#### *Costs*

Depending on the local authority involved, the requirement for contacting all home-owners can prolong the duration of the pre-implementation process and increase the associated costs. For instance, in addition to conducting door-to-door consultations, one scheme in Liverpool had to pay for land registry searches to be conducted for every property that was affected by the gates. This was made a legal requirement of the scheme to show that the people who had been consulted were in fact the rightful owners of the properties. In this case, the granting of closure orders was suspended until the completion of this process. It is therefore important that future schemes make allowances for this type of requirement, both in terms of the cost involved which may be quite substantial with larger housing areas, and the time necessary to complete this type of validation process.

### **Types of alleyways and permissions**

#### *Private vs. public passageways*

Private or unadopted passageways were found to be easier to secure. If they are not designated 'rights-of-way', local home-owners will be able to grant permission for the installation of the gates.

More serious issues will need to be addressed before installing gates along public passageways. If the Local Authority is the primary landowner, the first important task after gaining consent of all affected homeowners and residents is to apply for a closure order through the local Magistrate court. Projects that have taken this route report it to be a long and arduous process that can become costly, especially if groups in favour of open access to rights-of-way oppose the application. Because this process is time-consuming, one strategy that has been taken is to secure 'unadopted' passages first before directing attention to adopted ones.

#### *Legal/ownership issues*

With alleyways that have been adopted, once a closure order has been obtained, homeowners become the legal owners of the alleyway(s) and therefore become responsible for them. This has a number of practical implications. For example, it will be necessary to contact all public service providers who have laid pipes or cables underneath the alley and whose access to the alleys may subsequently be affected by the installation of the gates.

The providers to be contacted should include the local authority, emergency services, refuse collectors, and agencies that hold under-soil rights (electricity, water, gas, telephone and cable television). Such companies should retain responsibility for the maintenance and service of any such pipes and cables, but this will need to be clarified with them as they may relinquish such responsibilities.

It will be necessary to get clearance from the relevant service providers, or their agents, and discuss any specific requirements they may have once an alley is gated. These requirements could include ensuring access to the gated areas, or guaranteeing that no work occurs in the alley that would make access to the pipes or cables difficult (such as installing sheds or greenhouses).

Liverpool schemes found that they had to get agreement from all service providers for every alley that was to be gated – permission to go ahead in a general way would not be granted. Other projects soon found that when consent was not secured from all involved parties, the projects were not able to proceed.



Picture courtesy of Safer Terraces Project, Liverpool

## Design and construction of gates

Serious thought should be put into the design of the gates. Many different types of gates can be used, but the ones chosen should meet the requirements of the area in which they will be installed. For this reason, it has been found helpful for the consultation team to conduct a physical survey of the area that will receive the equipment before assuming a 'one-fits-all' scenario. Some alleys will be wider than normal, whilst others may need to be suitably modified for particular residents, for example those with physical disabilities or mobility problems. Both of these situations will need to be taken into account when determining the size and type of the gate to be installed.



Picture courtesy of Safer Terraces Project, Liverpool

It may also be necessary to be flexible regarding residents' requests for gate modifications. In one project, problems arose about access to dwellings. In this situation, a resident had asked that a doorbell be attached by the gate; otherwise his flat would have been inaccessible by visitors once the gate was installed.

Regardless of where they are placed, the gates should be made from a sturdy material. A number of projects chose a design that rendered the gate tamper-proof and difficult to climb (e.g. by limiting the gap between any bars or supports that an offender could get a foot or hand between). This design did however provide a clear view down the entire alley. Their gates opened inwards in order to protect their hinges, and were resilient against any damage that could be inflicted upon them; having them galvanised also protected them from rusting.

### *Public liability insurance*

If the gate is over eight feet tall, it may be possible to attach anti-climb devices on them, or to coat them with anti-climb paint. If a gate under the height of eight feet is installed with any anti-climb devices, the owners of the gate may be liable for any injuries caused by it (from trying to climb over it).

Regardless of the type of gate, if a person is injured in a gated alleyway, the residents may be liable to pay for any damages that the person might seek to claim. Residents should be made aware of this fact in order to encourage them to maintain the alleyways and to get them to explore insurance options if necessary. In some schemes, the gate owners (i.e. the affected homeowners, the consultation team or Home Watch group) had taken out public liability insurance to guard against this situation.

### *Locking devices*

One important issue was found to be the decision on how the gates should lock. Some schemes used gates that had an automatic mortice deadlock that clicked into place when closed; these were especially useful in areas where local residents were mainly students or other transient groups. These groups may be more

apathetic towards crime prevention than permanent residents and homeowners and may not take as much care in ensuring the gates are shut and locked behind them. Other projects chose gates that were locked manually with a key. Regardless of the gate chosen, it was important to find out who apart from local residents needed access to them, and to ensure that someone would open them at the designated time. If for example, the refuse department services the alley weekly, it was necessary to delegate a resident as a key-holder who was available to open the gate on collection days.

## Key handling

It is suggested that another meeting be held before the gates are installed in order for the gate keys to be distributed. Schemes have found it more practical for one key to open all the gates installed in the immediate area (i.e. along one alleyway), thereby guarding against the need for carrying different keys for every gate. In order to guarantee that authorised personnel are the only people able to make copies of the keys, security-style keys should be used. Residents and homeowners who subsequently misplace their key or any new residents moving into the area will have to contact the designated key-holder.

Alley-gating schemes in Liverpool have different approaches to handling the keys. Some found that it was best to have the police as the key-holders, especially in areas where there are transient populations. The police are in a better position to verify the individuals actually living in the area who are allowed to have a gate key.

Other schemes found that relying on the police was cumbersome and decided that having a Neighbourhood Watch or residents association member hold the key was a more feasible option. This key holder should know most of the local residents and would be more accessible to people than the police. It was suggested by the projects that the resident key-holder should also be the same individual delegated to open the gates during service visits.

Both of these approaches to who holds the keys work best in specific situations and that is the main issue that should be kept in mind when deciding on one of them.

## Checklist

The following list highlights the main steps that were found by most schemes to help expedite the alley-gating process<sup>2</sup>.

- 1 Survey the area that is to be secured. Look for entrances into and out of the area that are concealed from view and that lead along the sides or rears of neighbouring properties.

- 2 Consult with local residents and homeowners to determine whether they would support an alley-gating scheme in the area.
- 3 Consult with the local council Planning Department to find out what the status is of the chosen alleys – whether they are adopted or unadopted.
- 4 Secure the formal consent and support, in writing, of all local residents and homeowners who will be affected by the gates.
- 5 Contact all service providers who may have dealings in the area. This should include (but not be limited to) emergency services, utility companies, telephone and television companies, and refuse collectors.
- 6 Hold consultation meetings to inform all homeowners and residents of the issues surrounding alley-gating, and to distribute the keys for the gates. A street key-warden should be chosen at this point who will be available to open the gates to all service providers.
- 7 Discuss taking out public liability insurance with local homeowners.
- 8 Organise a scheme management committee that will be responsible for the maintenance of the gates.

## Relevant publications

Beckford, C. (1995) *The Alleygater's Guide to Gating Alleys*, Metropolitan Police Service

Budd, T. (1999) *Burglary of Domestic Dwellings: Findings from the British Crime Survey*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 4/99

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Tilley, N., Pease, K., Hough, M., and Brown, R. (1999) *Burglary Prevention: Early Lessons from the Crime Reduction Programme* Crime Reduction Research Series Paper 1

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<sup>2</sup> Robert, A (1998/9).; *Step By Step Guide to Alley-gating: The Safer Terraces Alley-gating Project* (unpublished).

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