

housing safe communities

an evaluation of recent initiatives

Edited by Steve Osborn

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HIGHGATE ESTATE

ESTATE BASED MANAGEMENT (CONCIERGE) INITIATIVE

*John Farr and Pat Moynihan***Birmingham's approach to security in high rise blocks**

Birmingham City Council owns over 400 high rise blocks and has tried several approaches to improving conditions for residents living in the blocks. These have included the installation of controlled entry systems, converting some tower blocks to sheltered housing and experimenting with single generation lettings policies for particular blocks. More recently, the Council has been developing a programme of concierge schemes for its most problematic high rise blocks.

Pilot concierge project

In 1987, pilot concierge schemes were introduced for 12 high rise blocks in the City. These were staffed for 14.5 hours per day and placed an emphasis on security. In 1988, the Housing Department carried out an evaluation of the pilot project by assessing the impact of a scheme introduced in April 1987 in two blocks—Oakington and Andover Houses on the Castle Vale Estate — which had been considered to be amongst the worst of the City's high rise blocks. The capital cost of introducing the scheme was estimated to be £47,000 per block and the running costs (for both blocks) to be £26,000 per annum. On the basis of their assessment of the impact of the scheme, the Housing Department concluded that there had been 'massive savings' on repairs expenditure, lift maintenance costs and on lost rents as a result of the concierge scheme (Birmingham City Council, 1988).

The Housing Department estimated annual savings of about £ 13,000 for Andover House and nearly £17,000 for Oakington House. The savings were calculated on the basis of comparisons between vandalism related expenditures on repairs and rent losses due to voids in 1988 and in 1986 (see Table 5).

Table 5; Expenditure on vandalism related repairs and total rent losses due to voids 1986 and 1988

	Andover House		Oakington House	
	1986	1988	1986	1988
Communal repairs	8,594	66	7,396	404
Lift repairs	778	337	3,216	91
Void repairs	6,240	3,494	4,742	-
Rent loss (voids)	2,900	1,465	2,657	742
Total	18,512	5,362	18,011	1,237

The Housing Department was unable to make calculations for the costs of repairs to individual flats because the repairs system was unable to separate out repairs arising from vandalism or burglary.

The Housing Department attempted to assess the cost effectiveness of the Castle Vale scheme by putting these identified *savings* in the context of the average running costs of the concierge scheme. The running costs of £26,000 per block were estimated, rather than actual, and on this basis net costs, taking into account savings, were estimated at about £13,000 for Andover House and about £9,000 for Oakington House. The net cost averaged out at £4.90 per week for each of the 86 flats in both blocks. In April 1988, the rental for flats covered by concierge scheme was increased by £1.45, which meant that "effectively other tenants of the City continue to subsidise those who benefit directly from the service" (Birmingham City Council, 1988).

The Housing Department also described a number of other outcomes from the Castle Vale scheme. The police reported that there had been a reduction in recorded burglaries in the two blocks, from 14 in the 16 months up to the introduction of the scheme in April 1987 to only four

by major dual carriageways, serving the city centre. The estate contains a good deal of public open space and pleasant, well maintained low rise terraces and bungalows. The five blocks covered by the concierge scheme contain 420 flats, built between 1961 and 1969. Three blocks are 20 storeys high and contain 116 one and two bedroom flats, two blocks are nine storeys high and contain 36 flats, also of one and two bedrooms. In total, there are 181 one-bed and 239 two-bed flats. The blocks are up to 500 metres apart.

The majority of residents in the three tower blocks — Studley, Wilmcote and Brinklow Towers — are single persons aged 18-64 years. In the nine storey blocks, Baskerville and Cantlow, there is a predominance of one parent households and elderly people (Birmingham City Council, 1990). A random survey carried out between January and April 1990 showed that only 25 of the 17 residents interviewed had children. Indicating a low child population. The population of the blocks does not appear to have altered significantly since the introduction of the scheme, as no changes were made to allocation policy. A majority of residents interviewed were of European origin, with 41% being described as Afro-Caribbean, Asian or 'other black'.

No information was available on employment status of residents, although 72 (61.5%) of the sample were claiming housing benefit, which indicates a high proportion of residents on a low income.

Description of initiative

The integrated concierge scheme at Highgate is part of an attempt to improve the security and management of the estate, with a more responsive, localised housing service which has beneficial social effects for the residents of the five blocks covered.

The concierges are based in a control office, with reception facilities, on the ground floor of Wilmcote Tower. This is linked to the other four blocks by means of an electronic system, using infra-red transmitters and receivers on the roofs of the blocks, enabling the concierge to check callers on video and unlock the doors of the blocks. They also monitor the interior of the lifts in all five blocks. Each block has a computerised door entry system. Tenants use electronic cards to gain access, and visitors are checked by the concierge or tenant before admission, by intercom.

An important feature of this scheme is the local housing office on the same floor as the control centre, with housing staff covering all the Highgate area. It is staffed during office hours from Monday to Friday and during this time the concierge acts as a receptionist for the Housing team. Outside working hours, the concierge acts as a first point of contact on housing enquiries, taking repair requests and dealing with emergencies. This sometimes leads to them having to leave the control room. At these times, unless there are two staff on duty, the video recorders are set to record activity and the system reverts to tenant-controlled entry. The concierge has access to on-line housing management information on rent, repairs and housing benefit, although this is not available 24 hours. They can help the tenant to specify the type of repair needed and order the repair by using the computer system. They will also hold keys for maintenance operatives, which reduces abortive calls and saves tenants time off work.

The additional security in Wilmcote Tower has enabled the Housing Department to maintain a number of furnished flats for short-term homeless lettings and respite units for domestic violence cases. Birmingham does not use bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless persons but is experiencing great pressure on its existing hostel provision. The 24 hour cover means that a homeless family can be admitted at any time of the day or night. Currently, there are three two-bed and six one-bed furnished flats, with new voids being added, part of a total of 258 in the City. 130 new furnished units are being planned for 1991/92.

The concierge staff are integrated into the local housing management structure and managed by the local housing manager. They do not normally carry out cleaning duties, which are still performed by caretakers. They work a rotating shift system, with a *floating* concierge giving additional cover at times of peak demand.

An important part of the introduction of the concierge system was the physical improvements to the blocks. The two lower blocks, Baskerville House and Cantlow House, were re-clad in brick and given new windows. All blocks were given a face-lift in the lobby areas, and new, strong self-closing entrance doors at both entrances. The back door is for tenant entry only, through their key cards. The front door has the video link and phone entry as well as key card entry. Additional security features were built into existing doors to flats — reinforced door frames, lock guards and spy-holes. The lifts in Baskerville and Cantlow had new lift cars. All incorporate an automatic return to ground floor facility, to lessen waiting time and minimise misuse. Studley, Brinklow and

Wilmcote Towers are connected to a central city-wide monitoring point, so that responses to breakdowns can be monitored and speeded up. This facility was extended to Cantlow and Baskerville Houses in 1991.

Wilmcote Tower, as well as having the Housing Office, incorporates a large tenants' room and kitchen for community activities such as Bingo and the council-run Credit Union. It also proves useful for displays on proposed housing improvements.

The entrance canopy has been glazed to act as a windbreak. Previously, the action of wind on the door closers was so strong that some elderly people could not open the doors. A small amount of landscaping has been undertaken.

The main problem for the designers of the Highgate scheme was the distance between the five blocks, which are up to 500 metres apart from each other, and the distribution of other types of property and roads between them. It was not possible to physically link the blocks or lay cables between them, so an infra-red system was installed.

The Highgate scheme was introduced to lessen crime inside the blocks by making the blocks less accessible to vandals and burglars. Break ins to flats were said to be common, and the estate had gained a reputation as an unsafe place, contributing to its unpopularity. It is in close proximity (separated by a dual carriageway) to Balsall Heath, described by the police as a high crime area and red light district.

Prior to the introduction of the concierge staff, police patrolled the blocks but with little apparent deterrent effect. A police surgery was held on the estate two years ago, but with poor attendance. This is now being reconsidered.

The beat area covering Highgate includes part of the city centre and its complement of beat police officers has been increased over the last 18 months as more civilian office workers have been recruited to do administrative work.

From the beginning, the local police were involved in the scheme, participating in the training of the concierges, and the resident beat officer maintains a close liaison with the concierges.

Now that the level of break-ins has apparently been reduced, the police say that they can concentrate on vehicle crime, which has always been high on the estate. The police admit to the possibility of some crime displacement but have seen no evidence of this. The police believe that the concierges have a role in relation to domestic violence, being able to offer immediate support or protection in advance of the police response; they also report improved contact with estate residents who report incidents to the concierge.

Implementation

The scheme was phased in over 10 months. In April 1989, an office for the concierges was set up in Wilmcote Tower.

Over the next nine months the equipment and cameras were installed. During this time the concierges patrolled the blocks introducing themselves to the tenants. In January 1990 the scheme became operational (the intercoms had been installed before the scheme). The Housing Office opened at the same time. A post completion survey of tenants was undertaken by the Housing Department between January and April 1990. The main difficulties identified in the Housing Department's survey related to the equipment, which are outlined below. This seems to be mainly due to the use of several contractors, but difficulties with the camera equipment and sound quality on the intercom are continuing. Concierges and housing staff were also interviewed at the same time.

The capital cost of the Highgate project, approximately £325,000 or £850 per flat, was met by Birmingham's HIP (Housing Investment Programme) allocation (Birmingham City Council, 1991). The revenue costs of running the concierge service, £107,803, is largely being met by the tenants, through a supplement of £3.50 per week. For the majority of tenants who are in receipt of housing benefit, the costs would be paid by additional housing benefit. The annual revenue costs are made up of £87,500 for salaries and £20,303 for other costs (lighting, heating, telephones etc). The costs of the local housing management staff are met by the housing revenue account.

Implementation difficulties

A number of problems were identified from the survey of tenants and from interviews with concierges and housing staff (Birmingham City Council, 1990). Problems identified by residents and staff included:

Problems with the equipment

- Distorted sound signals made it difficult to hear what visitors or tenants said over the Intercom. Birmingham's sound engineers said that these may be caused by the acoustics of the lobby areas, or flats.
- Heavy rain or fog disrupted the transmission of pictures from the blocks. The Highgate scheme uses an infra-red system. This problem could be eliminated or reduced by using *micro-wave* technology but the cost would not be Justified, according to the Housing Department.
- Faulty door design meant that the system controlling the opening of the doors did not always work. After experimenting with several systems, the Housing Department has installed a simpler system with fewer problems.
- Electronic keys and intercoms were sometimes faulty.
- Repairs to the system were too slow — more than one contractor was used. The contractor who installed the equipment went into liquidation, and the Department had to seek an alternative supplier.

Some of these technical problems were caused by integrating new equipment with an existing 10 year old phone entry system, and some because of untried new technology.

Staffing of the scheme

Half of the housing staff and all of the concierges thought there should be two concierges on duty every shift. The screens are left unmonitored when the concierge is answering enquiries at the reception desk or is called out to deal with an emergency incident. Patrolling of the blocks, which was thought to deter antisocial behaviour, is rarely done.

The need for a senior concierge has been recognised by the Housing Department, for out of hours and extra cover, as the concierges are relatively unsupported at night, and spoke of loneliness of the work in the early hours of the morning. Some overlap is allowed in the shift systems, and *the floating* concierge can provide doubling up at peak times, but there is no plan to have two concierges on duty at all times.

Concern was also expressed about the original shift pattern, which sometimes led to a concierge working six or seven nights in succession, with disruptive effects on health and family life. The Housing Department is keen to retain trained staff who have built up a knowledge of the blocks and the tenants and a relationship of trust with them and a new shift pattern has now been implemented, in response to these problems.

Expectations and training of the concierges

As well as a reception and security service, the expectation of the concierge scheme was that it could provide an on the spot 24 hour housing management service. Whilst they are undoubtedly an accessible, round the clock presence representing the housing service, it was not felt to be appropriate for them to give advice about rent arrears and housing benefit. Some have requested training in operating the housing computer, but as yet few are able to use the terminal situated in the control room, except for the input of repair requests.

Tenants' expectations

Residents were asked whether the concierge scheme was what they expected it to be. Over three quarters said that it was either what they expected or better than they expected. Most of those tenants who were disappointed had expected a concierge in each block (9%). Another cause of disappointment was that the intercoms did not work properly. However, the majority of tenants (80%) expressed satisfaction with the security service (Birmingham City Council. 1990).

Crime changes

Table 6 provides recorded crime statistics for three nine-month periods — the nine months prior to the beginning of the implementation of the scheme, the nine month implementation period and the nine months following full implementation. The figures show no reduction in overall crime levels since 1988 for the five blocks covered by the concierge scheme (West Midlands Police, 1991).

The number of recorded burglaries reduced by 33% during the implementation period and by a further 39% during the post implementation period. This was contrary to the trend for the rest of the estate (see Table 8). Offences against residents' motor vehicles in the parking areas around the five blocks increased, in line with trends for the estate as a whole (see Table 8). The failure of

the concierge scheme to affect autocrime was not a surprise, given the limited video surveillance of parking spaces afforded by the scheme.

Table 6: Recorded crime for the five blocks in the concierge scheme

	Pre-implementation Aug. 1988-Apr. 1989	During Implementation May 1988-Jan. 1990	Post-implementation Feb. 1990-Oct. 1990
Burglary	18	12	5
Autocrime	7	6	10
Vandalism and arson	4	7	4
Robbery	1	3	4
Other theft	3	9	5
Drug offences	1	0	2
Woundings	4	3	2
Sexual offences	0	2	0
Other	a	1	0
Total		43	32

Reductions in burglary during the implementation period were not a particular surprise, given that concierge staff were deployed from April 1989. Although their back-up equipment was not in place until November 1989 and operational difficulties persisted until January 1990, the concierge did patrol the blocks and this may have had a deterrent effect on crime within the blocks. In addition, the surveillance effect of the presence of contractors during this period should not be overlooked. The overall crime rate in the implementation period would have been lower still had it not been for a series of thefts of security equipment. In September 1989 security cameras were stolen from three different blocks and in January 1990 the vodaphones were stolen from the concierge office. These accounted for nearly half of the 'other theft' category in Table 6. The vodaphones were stolen again in August 1990.)

The local authority's records indicate reductions in vandalism, graffiti and abuse to lifts since the introduction of the scheme (Birmingham City Council. 1991b). Birmingham's lift engineers have calculated that electrical/mechanical breakdowns to lifts decreased by 13% in 1990 (roughly coincident with the introduction of the concierge scheme), breakdowns due to vandalism have decreased by 83% and planned repairs by 54%.

The reduction in cost is particularly striking for breakdowns due to vandalism, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Lift breakdowns and repairs 1989 and 1990

	Numbers	Cost	Ave breakdowns per lift p.a.	Ave.cost per call out
1989				
Electrical/mechanical breakdowns	85	£361196	10.62	£42.49
Breakdowns due to vandalism	112	£4076.43	14.00	£36.40
Planned repairs	59	£(835.4)	7.37	£31.11
1990				
Electrical/mechanical breakdowns	74	£3157.26	9.20	£42.66
Breakdowns due to vandalism	19	£877.06	2.37	£46.16
Planned repairs	27	£914.87	3.37	£33.88

The City Council was unable to disaggregate the costs of maintenance and improvements to the communal areas, but thought, at the time of their survey in May 1990, that the costs of maintaining the communal areas at the new higher standard would be far less. In fact, this improvement appears to have been brought about as the numbers of caretaking staff have since been reduced by two posts (from an establishment of seven covering Highgale and four blocks on the nearby St Martins estate) at an annual saving of £24,600 (including on costs).

Perhaps more importantly, 85% of tenants said they felt more secure since the introduction of the concierge scheme. 50% felt crime generally had fallen in their blocks. However, when asked

about more serious crimes such as mugging or the theft of cars, the majority said that they did not know whether there was any change (Birmingham City Council, 1990).

The crime rate in the rest of the beat area covering the Highgate Estate rose steadily during the period of concierge scheme implementation and thereafter (see Table 8). Overall, the numbers of recorded crimes in the rest of the beat area increased from 944 in the 12 months up to October 1989 to 1,095 in the 12 months up to October 1990 — an increase of 16%. The police claim that there was no displacement of crime from the five blocks in the concierge scheme but it was not possible to confirm this.

The rate of domestic burglary in the rest of Highgate remained stable but other crimes, and autocrime in particular, rose substantially in 1990.

Table 8: Recorded crime for Highgate Beat (excluding five blocks in concierge scheme)

	Nov. 1988-Oct. 1989	Nov. 1989-Oct. 1990	% change
Domestic burglary	102	98	-4
Autocrime	420	508	+21
Other crime	422	489	+ 16
Total	944	1,095	+ 16

Other outcomes

In addition to the positive crime outcomes and a greater feeling of security, residents were asked in the survey about their use of the housing service in Wilmcote Tower, the location of the concierge control centre and district office [Birmingham City Council, 1990].

67% of the tenants/respondents had used the housing service. 73% said they were satisfied with the service they had received. The majority of those who were dissatisfied mainly complained about the slowness of repairs.

Half of those who used the housing service felt that their housing problems were dealt with more quickly. Nearly half said that they had previously been reluctant to contact the Housing Department or Neighbourhood Office about a problem, mainly because of the inconvenience of visiting them. The Area Housing Office had been located over a mile from the estate, and covered a large part of the City, including Sparkbrook.

The number of new tenancies per year, from April 1984 to April 1990, for the five blocks was approximately 15 per hundred dwellings. In the last half of 1989 and the first three months of 1990, there has been a drop in void lettings, from 62 in the first half of 1989 to 34 in the second half, and 22 in the first quarter of 1990.

The average number of voids per month has fallen, from 5.9 before the scheme to 4.4 after, with the exception of what the Housing Department calls 'abscondments' — people giving up tenancies without giving notice. It appears that the tenant population has become more stable, but the Housing Department feels it is too early 'to draw firm conclusions' (Birmingham City Council, 1990).

Refusals of offers have fallen slightly, from 1.59 refusals per letting to 1.30 in the nine months up to 31st March 1990 (the first nine months of the scheme's operation), but further analysis is necessary to ascertain if this is a firm trend or not. There appears to have been no significant change in the number of applicants covering the area which includes the five blocks. Housing staff reported that tenants were beginning to request the five blocks, but no data can be produced to support this.

There has also been a marked reduction in the number of people who said they had wished to move from their block prior to the introduction of the scheme to those who still wished to move after — 54% to 33%. Most of the households with children still wished to move, probably reflecting the limited sizes of flats available in the blocks (one- and two-beds), and the general desire of families with children to have a house with a garden (Birmingham City Council, 1990).

Assessment of evidence

Evidence of reduced crime problems

The evaluation of the impact of the Highgate concierge scheme was based on three measures of outcome:

- Data on perceptions of crime changes from the City Council's own assessment of the scheme carried out shortly after its introduction. This was primarily concerned with identifying teething problems and involved a survey of residents and interviews with housing staff, concierges and the police (Birmingham City Council. 1990).
- Recorded crime statistics for three nine month periods — pre-implementation, during implementation and post implementation.
- Housing Department records of lift breakdowns and costs attributable to vandalism.

From these it is possible to conclude with some confidence that the burglary rate in the blocks covered by the scheme did fall during the implementation and post implementation periods; although we can be less confident about the extent of the fall given the relatively small numbers of burglaries involved.

The police view expressed in the City Council's assessment produced in April 1990 was that burglaries had been reduced by around 75%. The recorded crime statistics showed a similar fall (by the post Implementation period) but suggested that the subjective assessments made by the police had wildly exaggerated the overall level of burglary — by a factor of about 20.

The trends for other crimes were less clear. The views expressed by the police and council staff in the City Council's assessment (April 1990) indicated that all other crimes had reduced. These views were supported by residents' perceptions from the survey carried out at the same time. The recorded crime statistics, on the other hand, show little change in the overall crime rate and some marginal increases in the levels of particular crimes. However, the small numbers of incidents involved in each crime category (some of which have generally low reporting rates) make it difficult to make any judgement on trends.

There was support, however, for the subjective assessments of residents and officials from the Housing Department's records of repairs to lifts. A majority (73%) of residents had thought that graffiti and abuse to lifts, doors and chutes were greatly reduced. This impression appears to be supported by the greatly reduced numbers (83%) and costs (78%) of lift breakdowns due to vandalism in 1990 compared with 1989 (see Table 7). Unfortunately, details of other communal repairs attributable to vandalism (which had been presented for the earlier Castle Vale evaluation) were not available for the Highgate scheme.

The residents' survey also indicated that concern about crime in and around the blocks was greatly reduced in the very short period following the introduction of the scheme. Most (82%), for instance, felt safer going to and from their flats.

It appears, therefore, that the incidence of burglary and the costs of vandalism (at least to lifts) have indeed been reduced to a substantial extent and that residents feel safer in and around the blocks. To be confident about the trends, however, longer term monitoring is clearly required.

Evidence of Initiative's effect

The overall recorded crime rate for the five blocks covered by the scheme has stabilised and may even be falling. This runs contrary to the crime trend for the rest of the Highgate beat where the overall recorded crime rate rose by about 16% in the year up to October 1990. This stabilisation, however, has depended on a greatly reduced level of recorded domestic burglaries, which is in contrast to burglary trends in the rest of the Highgate beat which remained stable the 12 months up to October 1990.

The first fall in burglary levels (33%) corresponded with the beginning of the implementation phase, which involved the early deployment of concierge staff. A further reduction in burglary levels (39%) followed the introduction of the whole scheme.

Reductions in burglary could not be explained in terms of any noticeable change in the population in the blocks as a result of the scheme. Allocation policies were not affected by the scheme and there was no evidence of deliberate decanting of *antisocial* residents.

Evidence of effect of Individual measures

The beginning of the reduction in burglaries can be linked to the start of the implementation period (May 1989) when concierges were appointed and began operating from an office in Wilmcote Tower. Their duties at the time included patrolling the blocks.

The housing office was opened in November 1989. The whole system, including the installation of CCTV, was in place in January 1990 and this was followed by a further substantial downturn in burglary levels.

It appears that the concierge patrolling activity, together with the added surveillance provided by an on-site work force, had some effect on levels of burglary but that the full impact was only felt following the introduction of the complete scheme.

Evidence of permanence

Recorded crime statistics and data on repairs to lifts were monitored for nine months following the introduction of the complete scheme.

This is not a long enough period to be satisfied about the permanence of any changes in burglary and vandalism rates, although there has been a consistent downward trend over the 18 months since partial Implementation of the scheme.

Evidence of replicability

Birmingham's first concierge project for 12 blocks in the City, introduced in April/May 1987, involved a security based concierge service. Concierges were based in each block and exclusively undertook security duties. The pilot scheme in two blocks on the Castle Vale Estate was monitored in terms of communal repairs, lift repairs, void property repairs and rent loss from voids.

The Housing Department calculated that, compared with 1986, around £29,000 would be saved in 1988 from reduced repairs attributable to vandalism and reduced rent loss for the two blocks. (The Housing Department was not able to disaggregate the costs of repairs to individual flats attributable to vandalism.) This was set against the £52,000 estimated running costs in 1988 for the concierge service for both blocks. Covering these running costs from increased rents would average out at around £11.60 per dwelling per week; if estimated savings were taken into account, the additional rent required would fall to around £5.70 for one block and about £4.10 for the other block.

The Housing Department concluded that the security based concierge service was not cost effective. The saving estimated for the Castle Vale scheme were thought to be exceptional. The other 10 blocks in the pilot project, although not monitored in the same way, appeared to be less successful and it was clear that some blocks would need 24 hour concierge cover (as opposed to the 14.5 hour cover provided in the pilot project) to ensure that controlled access systems worked effectively. In addition, the city-wide survey of residents of blocks in 1988 had indicated that an additional rent charge of £3 per week for blocks covered by concierges was the most that residents would be prepared to pay for the additional service.

As far as the City of Birmingham was concerned, therefore, the original security based concierge service was not replicable throughout the City's high-rise blocks. The restriction on concierges to exclusively carrying out security functions was thought to be a wasteful use of staff resources (and not in keeping with the Housing Department's customer care policy) and the introduction of concierge bases in each block too expensive, particularly in light of the general need to provide 24 hour concierge cover.

It was calculated that a dispersed concierge scheme for Castle Vale, with one concierge office providing 24 hour monitoring of five blocks, would be wholly paid for through an increase of £3 on rents, after taking into account the previously identified savings.

The running costs of the dispersed concierge scheme for the Highgate Estate, at around £108,000 per annum, costs in the region of £5 per week per flat. The residents pay a supplement of £3.50 per week towards the costs of the scheme. A number of savings appeared to have accrued from reduced repair costs — over £3,000 in 1990 from reduced lift breakdowns arising from vandalism — although the Housing Department did not attempt to collect the kind of (useful) data which it had for the earlier Castle Vale scheme evaluation.

However, the main saving appears to have resulted from the reduction in caretaking staff which was made possible. It is claimed, by fewer maintenance and cleaning problems. Around £24,000 per annum was being saved from two fewer caretaking posts. The savings identified above translate to about £1.25 per week per flat — in other words, they appear to make up most of the gap between increased running costs and increased rent levels. It would appear, therefore, that the kinds of sums residents were prepared to pay in extra rent cover the net cost of the Highgate type of dispersed concierge scheme. It is not clear, however, whether this kind of scheme would be so successful in blocks with more serious crime problems (the Highgate concierge site appeared to have a worse reputation than it deserved), particularly in the light of the continuing CCTV monitoring problems inherent in the infra-red system.

Postscript

Recorded crime figures are now available for each of the years between 1987 and 1992 and for each of the five blocks. These show that the total numbers of crimes fell from a high of 65 in 1987 to a low of 42 in 1989, but rose again to 64 in 1990 and 60 in 1991 before falling back again to 44 in 1992. Figures for individual categories of crime more or less followed the same pattern. Figures for individual blocks are more enlightening, however. They show that the main beneficiary of the scheme was Wilmcote House, the block in which the concierge station was located. Recorded crimes in Wilmcote House fell from a high of 22 in 1987 to 12 in 1991 and 10 in 1992. There was some evidence, also, that the scheme may be belatedly having an influence on crime levels in the closest block to Wilmcote House — Brnklow House, where recorded crime levels were actually higher in 1991 (26 incidents) than in 1987 (20 incidents) but fell sharply in 1992 (to 23 incidents). The particular influence of the scheme on the situation in Wilmcote House was supported by a household survey carried out in October 1992 which estimated, for instance, that there were no burglaries (excluding attempts) in the previous 12 months in Wilmcote House, but rates of between 1 in 6 and 1 in 13 households burgled (excluding attempts) in the other four blocks.

A further study of the Highgate scheme is currently under way as part of a national study of concierge, controlled entry and similar schemes being undertaken by the Safe Neighbourhoods Unit for the Department of the Environment. The aforementioned household survey forms part of that study. It does appear, however, without pre-judging the outcome of the latest study, that dispersed concierge schemes of this type may only have an impact in the longer term on crime problems in the blocks where the concierges themselves are located. The Council view is that technological problems have hampered the scheme and that an upgraded system of CCTV surveillance and phone entries, which the Council is planning to introduce, will have a greater impact on the outlying blocks.

Source material:

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West Midlands Police beat police officer — January 1991