



No open-and-shut case

After walk first reported on a controversial case of alleygating in Coventry, the Ramblers' Association were invited to come and see how a similar scheme has actually benefited the local community in Newcastle-under-Lyme. But with more heated debate brewing over another gated route in Stockport, Dominic Bates discovers the issue is far from clear-cut.

Ian Jenkinson is a passionate man. As a paid-up member of the Ramblers' Association, he believes passionately in the protection of public footpaths.

And as corporate director of Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and chair of their Crime and Disorder Partnership (CDRP), he believes just as passionately in stamping out the anti-social behaviour that has plagued local alleyways and terrified nearby residents.

So it's not surprising that when Ian read The Gate Debate article in the autumn edition of walk (p48) and disagreed with its broad criticism of a gated alley in Coventry, he disagreed passionately. '[It] was an affront to CDRPs who deal with applications for gating orders,' was his response in a subsequent letter to the magazine.

Sitting in his council offices, Ian denies that gating orders are either ill-thought through or used without concern for walkers' rights.

"As a local authority, we want to expand the rights of way network", he says. "They fit with so many of our objectives to improve quality of life, providing hundreds of benefits to the community such as helping to prevent obesity in kids. But we've also got to deal with crime and disorder issues when they occur."

One problem alley Ian cites saw over a year of nuisance behaviour from youths who were drug-taking, drinking and vandalising property. The elderly residents of the adjacent cul-de-sac were too scared to call police for fear of recrimination attacks before the alley was finally gated.

"We tried a number of unsuccessful alternatives before deciding on these measures," says Clare Rawlins of the council's community safety department.

A divisive issue

Nationally, nearly 900 paths and alleyways have been gated in England and Wales since gating orders were introduced 18 months ago. The majority are locked 24 hours-a-day with access only for those living alongside the path.

In Newcastle-under-Lyme, just one public footpath is gated and locked during nighttime hours only, but several private alleys in the town centre also have gates on them. The council claims all were shut after consulting widely with local businesses and path users, despite there being no legal obligation to do so - something Ramblers' Association footpath campaigner Martin Key praises as a model of good practice. But Ian Jenkinson rejects the

Ramblers' call for an independent inspector to be appointed when there is public opposition to a gating order, decrying the "colossal costs" and preferring the decision be made by local representatives and the CDRP.

"Gating orders are a divisive issue," Martin warns. "Used correctly they can provide residents with peace and security by reducing the threat of crime and anti-social behaviour. Used incorrectly and they can split communities and deny people the chance to live independent, sustainable lives."

A storm in Stockport

The residents battling over one particular alleyway in Stockport know all too well how divisive a gating order can be. The 20ft right of way on Kingsland Road, in Cheadle Heath, acts as a cut-through to local shops and services for a large housing estate and has beleaguered the 12 households that live on the route for nearly 20 years.

"The dregs of the earth come down here vandalising everyone's cars," complained one resident and former local shop owner, who declined to be named after recently having his car 'keyed' and window smashed for previous comments in the local paper. "They've pulled out fence railings and traipsed through my neighbours' gardens, smashing up garages. It's not right." He blames the pub at the opposite end of the road for some of the anti-social behaviour as well as kids from the neighbouring Walnut Tree housing estate.

In August, Stockport Council decided to permanently close the route off and install CCTV. The move caused uproar among Walnut Tree's residents, especially mothers and the elderly who use the shortcut to get to the local primary school and doctor's surgery.

"My mum's not too good on her legs and it's a much longer walk for her to the doctor's," complained Belinda Maher.

Local mum Chantell Kilvert says the closure of the path would add 15 minutes to her children's school journeys and she, like other local parents, was worried about an extended stretch along the very busy and barrier-free A560 that they'd normally avoid. "I use the path 15 to 20 times a day to get to the shops for my family," she says.

Unhappy compromise

Once the 9ft steel gates went up, they were torn down within five days by vandals before being re-erected. Then a council ballot of



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residents decided the gates should be opened between 7am and 9pm by a contractor costing £5.5k.

It's a compromise that's left nobody happy. Those on the Walnut Tree estate still face long diversions outside the gates' opening hours and the households living on the path continue to endure anti-social behaviour from its users.

"The current system encourages knee-jerk solutions like this that end up costing a lot of money, fail to solve the problems and leave nobody satisfied with the outcome," says Ramblers footpath campaigner Des Garrahan. "The Ramblers isn't against every alley-gating order, but does oppose the legislation these orders are made under which in practice has

no meaningful consultation and no right of appeal."

For our anonymous Kingsland Road resident though it's all been too much, and he's finally selling up and moving out. "It's not about blocking people's right of way, it's about protecting people's property from damage and vandalism," he tells us, before opening the scratched paintwork of his car door and driving off.

Ramblers' rights of way team are keen to hear about any other examples of good or bad practice by local authorities using alleygating to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour. Please send your stories to martink@ramblers.org.uk or ☎ 020 7339 8584