

Neighbouring in contemporary Britain

A think-piece for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Housing and Neighbourhoods Committee

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Executive Summary

Fifty years ago many of Britain's cities appeared to have stable and broadly contented communities with strong neighbourly ties. At that time, Young and Willmott's well known study of life in London's East End spoke of doors remaining unlocked and children playing in the streets watched over by their neighbours. They told anecdotes of mutual support and help. But in recent decades, increased mobility, longer life expectancies as well as the breakdown of the extended family have changed the way we live our lives and the extent to which we are able to be 'neighbourly'.

This think-piece reviews the way people interact with their neighbours (*neighbouring*) in contemporary Britain and questions whether we still need good neighbouring relationships (*neighbourliness*) to improve our wellbeing and our happiness. The think-piece reviews what we know about neighbouring and identifies issues for further research.

The think-piece found that:

Neighbouring is still important – although its dynamics have changed:

- Neighbourliness and connections with people around us are part of an innate human need to bond. Individuals tend to socialize, and despite the changing family structures and work-life balances, people will always be drawn to other people.
- Compared to fifty years ago, people are now far more mobile, and even knowing one's neighbours is becoming more challenging as changes like a more dynamic housing market, more accessible transport (especially the increased use of cars), longer commuting times, less welcoming spaces for interaction and more leisure time choices squeeze out the time people spend in their locality and undermine its conviviality.
- While these trends may mean local neighbourhoods no longer play the same role in people's lives as they did fifty years ago, evidence shows that their areas of residence

nonetheless remain pertinent to many people's lives. Data also suggests that trust levels are still relatively high with 47 per cent of people trusting many people in their neighbourhood and another 37 per cent trusting some people (*Home Office Citizenship Survey 2003*).

- Neighbouring relations are not always positive. They can take a range of forms from provocatively negative neighbouring, in the form of antisocial behaviour, at one extreme, to intrusive, nosey neighbouring on the other. However, perhaps more common is the 'non committal neighbouring' exhibited in between.
- The rhetoric of neighbourliness evokes memories of a bygone age. But neighbourliness (good neighbouring) is not an obsolete concern. Evidence shows that neighbourliness contributes to people's health and wellbeing and can be important for social efficacy, child development, crime reduction and for an overall feeling of safety, belonging and protection. Good neighbours may be particularly important for those who spend more time in their local area – flexible workers, young families, the young, the elderly, the unemployed and the disabled.
- On the other hand, neighbourliness today is not the answer to every social problem, from the fragmentation of the family to political disengagement. Too much bonding can lead to self-segregation, and too much active neighbourliness can lead to resentment when people's privacy is breached. The best approach may be to create a framework of conditions that help residents to be neighbourly *when* and *if* they want to be.
- How much people interact and support each other as neighbours is influenced by a complex and wide range of factors including: the design of the built environment, crime, levels of trust, neighbourhood governance, the demography of an area, local shops or cafés.
- Neighbourhoods where there are children, nurseries or primary schools, elderly people or a high percentage of home-owners tend to be more neighbourly than others. Recent migration, language barriers, crime, litter and poor

neighbourhood governance are instead some of the factors that may inhibit residents' sense of neighbourliness.

- According to the Home Office Citizenship Survey 2003, 42 per cent of people socialise with their neighbours or friends at least once a week, and another 25 per cent at least once a month. "The level of interaction and mutual support tends to be higher in neighbourhoods where people are satisfied with their area. Satisfaction in turn increases the willingness of residents to get involved in their local areas and to participate in local activities and organisations. Engagement is really a key to meeting local people and developing meaningful links, as well as to getting things done.

Creating spaces for interaction and dialogue can encourage neighbourliness:

- The evidence suggests that neighborhoods that are people-friendly and have well designed, well kept public spaces where people can spend time outside their homes are usually successful in providing the opportunity for residents to 'use' and enjoy their local areas and to meet other residents. Local shops, car boot sales and markets can all help the development of social relations between neighbours.
- Neighbourliness is not very amenable to large-scale national policies. The local, fine-grained detail is more important for bringing people together. For this reason, the most important condition would be to enable local areas to choose from the widest range of possible options and to encourage a good understanding of what can be done locally and why.
- Although the evidence is limited, there are grounds to suggest that some practical actions could facilitate neighbourliness. These include: better designed and maintained spaces for social encounter (from parks to health centres); developing homes more conducive to socializing through porches and front gardens; providing places for meeting and interaction between children and families through extended schools, local street parties, or other opportunities for people to connect, such as internet based local information-sharing services.

- More research however is needed to better explore the relation between neighbouring and sense of place as well as the impact of neighboring behaviour on people's sense of safety, loneliness and social capital.

While life patterns have changed, often shifting our frames of reference outside the neighbourhoods where we live, the evidence suggests that good relations with neighbours at the very local level can still have very beneficial effects on quality of life, and are still valued by most people. They may not be based on family, close friendship or 'strong ties', as they used to be in the past, but respect, friendliness, and help in times of crisis or need can go a long way to improving people's lives. While neighbourliness is not for everyone, facilitating more encounters between neighbours could support a rediscovery of the local – and help people, in particular the most vulnerable, to live happier and healthier lives.

Introduction: Neighbouring now and in the past

This think-piece aims to investigate the role of neighbouring in contemporary Britain, and to provide a clear and informed overview of a much-debated area. By *neighbouring*, we mean social relations between people living in close proximity; *neighbourliness* is used specifically to discuss positive neighbouring relations. The think-piece considers the current state of play by reviewing existing literature on these themes and sets out some key considerations for further work.

Neighbouring links to notions of communities based around 'place'. In early 2004, Gordon Brown described the Kirkcaldy of his childhood as a:

“community not in any sense as some forced coming together, some sentimental togetherness for the sake of appearances, but a largely unquestioned conviction that we could learn from each other and call on each other in times of need, that we owed obligations to each other because our neighbours were part also of what we all were: the idea of neighbourliness woven into the way we led our lives”.

Today neighbouring and neighbourliness appear to play a more secondary role in people's lives. In the news media they are associated more with indifference, noise, antisocial behaviour (ASB) or 'neighbours from hell' than with close ties, mutual support and solidarity, though popular sagas such as *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* continue to focus on the drama of close-knit neighbourhoods.

While popular perceptions have their own reality, real social changes such as increasing mobility, longer commuting times and family fragmentation have all contributed to transforming neighbourliness into something which needs to be worked on, rather than being a natural consequence of living together. The question arises of what place 'neighbouring' has in our lives today.

This think-piece begins by suggesting that neighbouring has changed and then looks at the following key questions:

- 1) What does neighbouring mean in contemporary Britain?
- 2) Is neighbourliness declining and if so should we be concerned?
- 3) Why is neighbourliness important today?
- 4) How should we negotiate the balance between neighbourliness, privacy and exclusion?
- 5) Which factors influence modern neighbourliness?
- 6) What are the policy implications and what future research is needed?

How has neighbouring changed?

A half-century ago, Michael Young and Peter Willmott's well-known study of neighbourhood and community relations, *Family & Kinship in East London* (1957) found a world where:

“Bethnal Greeners are not lonely people: whenever they go for a walk in the street, for a drink in the pub, or for a row on the lake in Victoria Park, they know the faces in the crowd”.

The study analysed the social relations that underpinned this web of mutual recognition, support and interaction. Longstanding residency across generations, reinforced by overlapping ties of extended family and friendship, had helped to lay down a strong sense of ultra-local identity. Grandparents living a few minutes walk away helped to raise grandchildren. As Chris Phillipson recently showed (2006), back in 1950s Bethnal Green, older people had an average of 13 relatives living within a mile, and 53 per cent of them had a married child in the same dwelling or within a five minutes' walk. Family blurred into proximity, to the point where children would call female neighbours “auntie”.

Life remained largely local: some residents claimed never to have left Bethnal Green. It was a socially homogeneous place – white, working class, with the men employed mostly in the docks, as artisans or as manual labourers, and formal female employment low. Private space offered few amenities and was reserved for the immediate family, but front doors were unlocked to the street, and the playground not yet overtaken by cars, its territory contested in the pitched battles of childhood. Living together was a continuous, immediate and defining experience.

In some parts of Britain, particularly in rural areas, elements of this world may persist to this day. But these are islands in a sea of change wrought by the simultaneous delocalization and individualization of communications, economics and life over the last half-century. The 'slum clearances' which scattered Bethnal Green families across estates were a small part of this transformation. Other trends, particularly the rise of the car and of television and home entertainment systems, the entry of women into the labour market, the changing shape of the welfare state, and increasing mobility of residence, despite being largely positive developments, have nonetheless changed the landscape for neighbouring. The neighbourliness of 1950s' Bethnal Green played itself out in a public realm built by the local state, civic society and the marketplace. This small world of local spaces, public baths, parks, shops and social clubs provided the stage for repeated encounter. But close 'natural' neighbouring depended vitally on deeper roots: family, identity and an enclosed horizon of locality. That web of strong ties has passed, as has the capacity of neighbourhood social systems to satisfy most of their residents' desires.

To understand these fundamental changes does not seek to fall into the trap of nostalgia. But 'natural' neighbouring was perhaps more a kind of largely unquestioned fate, based on the particular social relations that circumscribed lives in the 'Bethnal Greens' and 'Kirkcaldys' of the past. The evidence is clear that for a large proportion of the British population, neighbouring today is based on somewhat weaker ties. Yet as sociologists and geographers have suggested, in the context of modernity and globalization, the local sphere and the need for a sense of belonging may be taking on a greater sense of importance in a world of growing uncertainty (Castells, 1986; Amin, 2001, 2; Bauman, 2000). Our analysis suggests at least three reasons why neighbourly practices have decreased despite strong potential demand:

1. Strong local ties, which provided the foundation for the close neighbouring of the past, have been eroded or dispersed as people's mobility has increased;
2. Competition from alternative activities and social spheres has squeezed out some local activities, practices and participation in the church, nursing clubs and local volunteering, for example, reducing the opportunity for neighbouring;

3. Barriers to neighbouring have been erected that close down the physical and social space in which it can take place, for instance, through the domination of residential streets by cars, or the limitations of neighbourhood public spaces.

The third element above may be particularly susceptible to change through redesign and collective action, although greater research is needed to understand the impact of removing barriers or putting various social innovations into practice. It is nonetheless clear that minimal neighbourhood interaction and the lack of a local public sphere mean that we know less about who our neighbours are and what we might have in common: one small sample survey of 1000 members of the public nationwide (Linden Homes, 2005) suggests that as many as 6 in 10 British people do not know any of their neighbours' names. Common activities in shared spaces, pursued not unquestioningly but in a modern, enquiring yet respectful way, could help people recognize each other as human beings rather than as threatening strangers.

This think-piece is organized into three parts:

Section 1 explores the conceptual issues, history and psychological importance of *neighbouring* and *neighbourliness*, examining their importance in contemporary Britain.

Section 2 brings together evidence on the character and impact of current neighbouring practices and reviews the main factors (socio-demographic, social capital and physical conditions) that may or may not enable the development of neighbourliness. It is important to note that some of the studies cited in this report are based on small samples or international experiences that therefore have limitations – more work could help to see how far these findings are true within Britain as a nation.

Section 3 concludes the think-piece with an analysis of policy and practice implications, also suggesting possible directions for future research on the basis of gaps in the evidence base.

Section 1

The importance of neighbouring in contemporary Britain

This section explores the conceptual issues, history and psychological importance of *neighbouring* and *neighbourliness*, considering their importance in contemporary Britain. In particular it reviews the:

- contested meanings of the term *neighbouring*;
- the status of neighbouring in contemporary Britain, investigating in particular whether and why commentators suggest that neighbouring might be in decline;
- the importance of neighbouring in modern day British society.

1. What does 'neighbouring' mean?

Compared to the literature on social capital or community conflict, the literature on neighbouring, and in particular on neighbourliness, is sparse and diverse. This is surprising if one considers the fact that relations between neighbours are among the oldest type of connections in human history. For thousands of years, humans have lived together in settlements, as confirmed by archaeological excavations going as far back as Neolithic settlements. At Abu Hureyra in the Levant, for example, although each Neolithic house was separated from its neighbours, all were built close together with only narrow lanes and courts between them. The archaeologists noted that remains showed how food was prepared outside and domestic rubbish was allowed to accumulate between the buildings. People have lived close to each other for centuries and have inevitably had positive or conflicting relationships due to close vicinity, lack of privacy and the 'intruding' habits of other people. Accordingly, neighbouring is an old concept with layers of meaning, associations and value blurring into each other.

In general, the term ***neighbouring* refers to social interaction between people living in close residential proximity**. According to the literature, it can be positive, negative or indifferent in nature (Berry, et al., 1990; Keller, 1968; Skjaeveland, Garling and Maeland, 1996). Neighbouring can be about greeting neighbours

in the streets as well as banging against a wall when your next-door neighbour is playing his drum kit. **Neighbourliness, by contrast, refers primarily to positive and 'good' neighbouring,** although behaviour intended as neighbourly can at times be interpreted by others as intrusive, and some scholars have used the two terms interchangeably (Bridge, et al., 2004).

Thus, while neighbouring is a more encompassing and objective concept, neighbourliness is challenging to define in concrete terms: what 'good neighbouring' might entail varies according to context and perspective. Philip Abrams defined neighbourliness in terms of "friendliness, helpfulness, and respect for privacy" (Bulmer, 1986) while Allan in 1983 went further to describe the essence of good neighbouring as one that:

"lies in maintaining the tension between cooperation and privacy, helpfulness and non-interference, between friendliness and distance".

Neighbourliness, as distinct from neighbouring, means being neither an intrusive "busybody" nor a distance-keeping "nobody" (Crow, et al., 2002). It encompasses a precarious balance of different factors that include various forms of social activity, reciprocal aid and support, alongside respect for privacy and common civility.

Neighbourly relations are a form of social capital, defined by Robert Putnam as:

"features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives... Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust" (Putnam, 1995).

But what does this mean in practice? Is neighbourliness about developing close and mutually supportive relationships, borrowing the occasional item, or just an occasional greeting in the street? When is distant politeness appropriate, and when could it be one's duty to enforce the politeness of others? Should neighbours keep a 'friendly distance' or behave more like a 'family'?

Back in 1954, Peter Mann distinguished two types of neighbourliness - manifest and latent. By manifest neighbourliness he meant an “observable social interaction and exchange of help and goods”, face-to-face contact, chatting over the garden fence, going out socially with neighbours and using neighbours as a regular source of informal help. By contrast, latent neighbourliness is behaviour unleashed in response to an emergency or an urgent need. Mann argues that latent neighbourliness may be the most important factor in social cohesion. An ‘active’ neighbour is not always a ‘good’ neighbour: too much manifest neighbourliness can lead to resentment, and social interaction can of course be negative (for instance when it involves complaining, threats or insults). This distinction is echoed in the more recent discrimination between social capital and Robert Sampson’s concept of “collective efficacy”, by which is meant norms and social networks that can be activated when needed. A certain stock of manifest neighbourliness is of course necessary to make latent neighbourliness possible.

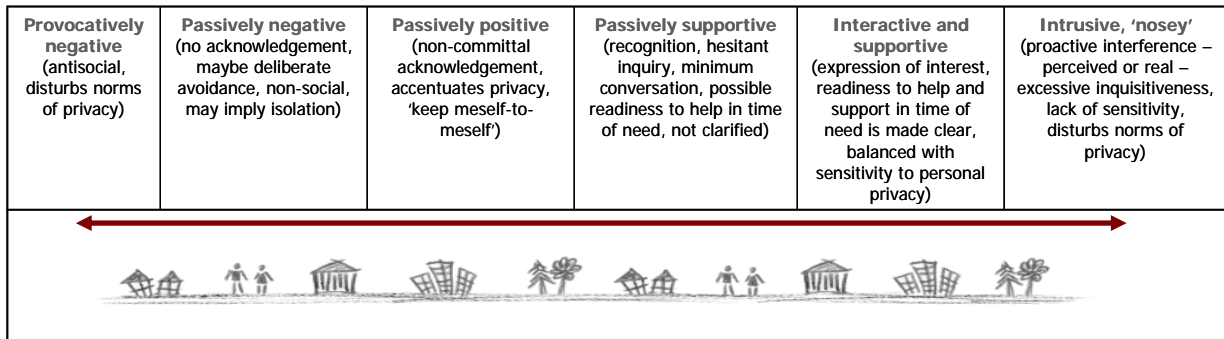
The subjectivity of the concept of ‘good neighbouring’ has not only prevented scholars from reaching clear agreement on definitions, but has also generated a wide range of benchmarks across the disciplines for measuring neighbourliness. These range from low-level individual interactions to collective actions to promote common interests:

- greeting neighbours in the street and chatting;
- exchanging Christmas cards;
- providing information (e.g. on services, events, other neighbours – in the form of gossip);
- lending things to neighbours (milk, ladders, etc);
- socialising (dinner parties, etc);
- watching out for neighbours (neighbourhood watch schemes; keeping keys when the neighbours are on holiday, helping with shopping etc);
- helping neighbours in times of crisis (e.g. burglary, bereavement);
- doing things collectively (recycling schemes, campaigning for change, neighbourhood radio, street parties etc.)

Definitions of neighbourly behaviour are not consistent and unchanging, but influenced by norms and expectations which differ

from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and person to person (Crow, et al., 2002). Optimal relations represent different things for different people and for the same groups at different times. A possible spectrum of neighbouring behaviours for contemporary Britain is reproduced in the diagram below:

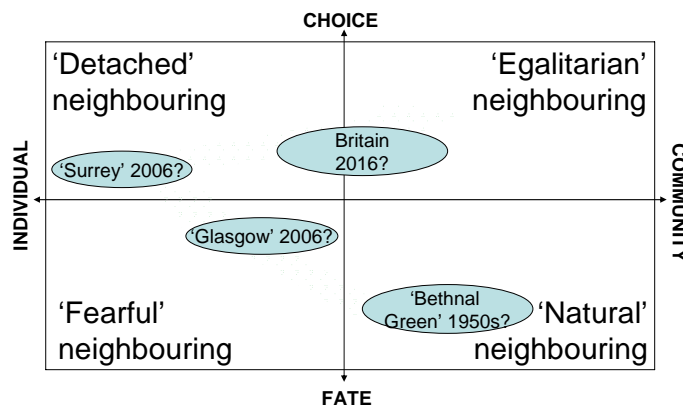
Figure 1. The neighbouring continuum



Source: Kevin Harris, Local Level (2006)

Whereas in 1950s Bethnal Green the majority of people might have found themselves toward the right-hand side of this spectrum (i.e. more involved with their neighbours), today we hypothesize, based on our review of the literature, that the distribution is skewed toward the centre/left-hand side (i.e. less involved), with significant minorities who are “intrusive” or “passively supportive”, but very few who are “interactive and supportive”. The difference in emphasis between now and the past could be broadly mapped in the following way:

Figure 2. A map of neighbouring.



Our analysis suggests four psycho-social contexts for neighbouring:

- ‘Natural’ neighbouring, rooted in family, identity and a dense network of strong ties.
- ‘Fearful’ neighbouring, in which public order is vulnerable and residents suffer from negative neighbouring behaviour.
- ‘Detached’ neighbouring, in which people keep themselves to themselves and there is little interaction.
- ‘Egalitarian’ neighbouring, based on respect, enquiry and the valuing of common interest.

A decline in opportunities to interact and meet at the local level has transformed the more natural type of neighbouring that so characterised the East End world described by Michael Young and Peter Willmott into a more fearful or detached neighbouring. The question is, why - and could a more positive approach to contemporary neighbouring be emerging?

2. Is neighbourliness declining?

The decline of neighbouring is now often blamed on globalisation, rather than a centuries-long process of change and modernity. But already at the end of the nineteenth century, sociologists such as Tonnies, Durkheim and Weber were analysing the decline of traditional forms of very local place-based community. Social relations were reconfigured by the industrial revolution, the shift of populations to the cities, instrumental exchange and the nation-state. Durkheim distinguished between an old “mechanical solidarity” based on homogeneous identity and collectivism, and an emerging kind of “organic solidarity” based on the specialisation and division of labour, which led to growing individualism and the delocalisation of work, leisure and community. While he thought mutual interdependence could serve as new grounds for social cohesion, he also recognized the damage that a new world of fragmented relations could cause (Durkheim, 1947; 1951).

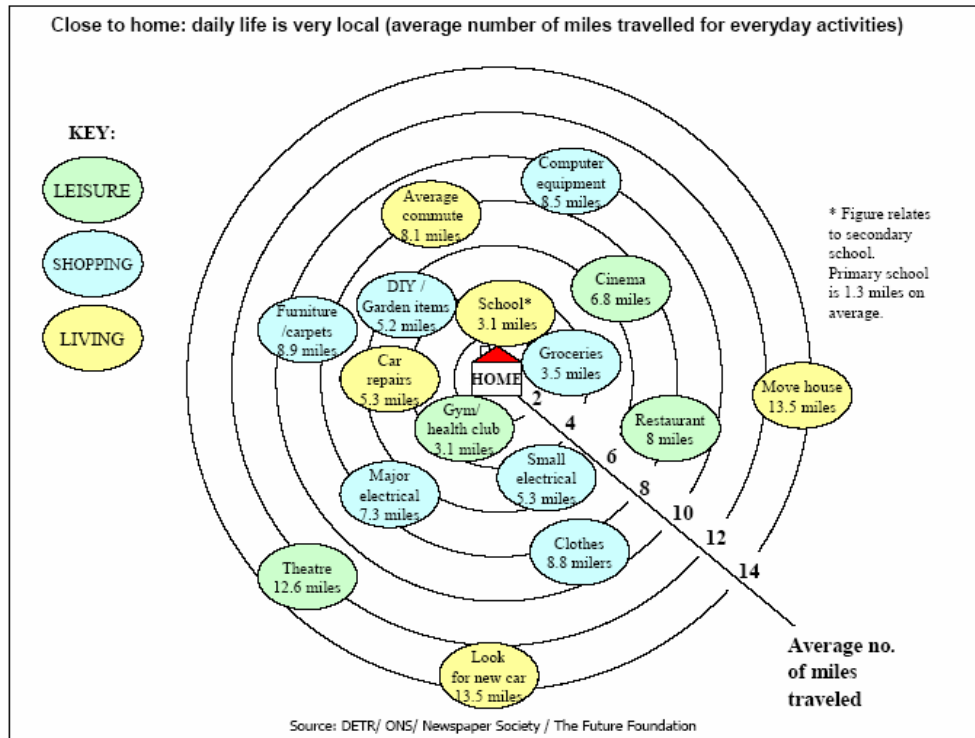
Moving to the city broke apart many of the old ties of kinship, local belonging and faith. These were often reconstructed in their new setting, in the East End of London for one. But beyond certain thresholds of geographical mobility, local social encounter, competing pressures and extra-local attraction, close-knit

neighbourliness became gradually hollowed out (Hilder, 2006). In this sense, social trends have had a corrosive effect on both traditional communities and neighbourhood relations. However, this is not new. The solidarity and mutual support highlighted by Michael Young and Peter Willmott in the late fifties, were due to a period of relative stability. Evidence shows that neighbourliness has waxed and waned across history. While good neighbouring ties are strong in periods of stability (like the '50s), they decline in periods of high geographical mobility. Beyond this analysis of broad shifts in social values, declining levels of neighbourliness can be traced to specific changes in the way we live. These changes are explored below.

More mobility and a more dynamic housing market

Increased mobility is a key factor: mobility of residence, of employment, of leisure and acquaintanceship. In 1950s Bethnal Green, stability and length of residence helped to lay down a dense and overlapping set of relationships and a sense of local belonging. A dynamic housing market has partially changed this. Today people move with more ease than in the past and rising property prices have fragmented previously stable communities. During 2002, 1.6 million property transactions took place in England and Wales, of which just over 1.4 million were residential transactions (*National Statistics* 2004). 62 per cent of people relocate within a five mile radius when moving home according to one small study (Wicks and Asato, 2002), but multiple moves compound the scattering effect. Research has nonetheless shown that 44 per cent of people live in the local authority area in which they were born (*BHP data on mobility and joblessness*, 2001 in Donovan, et al., 2002) The chart below shows that most daily activities occur locally but this can be within a radius of as much as 8 to 9 miles, not within the immediate neighbourhood, but within the broader local area (Donovan, et al., 2002).

Figure 3. Average number of miles travelled for everyday activities



Longer commuting times and working hours

Perhaps more significantly, commuting time is growing and working hours are relatively high compared to other European Union (EU) countries. In 2003, the RAC Foundation reported that British commuters have the longest journeys to work in Europe, with the average trip taking 45 minutes, almost twice as long as the commute faced by Italians and seven minutes more than the EU average (RAC, 2003). According to the report, the average distance travelled by UK workers is 8.5 miles – 17 per cent further than a decade ago. A *Mori* poll of 828 British employees aged 18+ across 164 sampling points (1998) found that a quarter of workers said that they often work in the evening, at night or at weekends and 38 per cent said that they had to work anti-social hours in their current place of work. A more recent *Amicus* survey of over 3,000 of its staff in the UK (2003) showed 57 per cent of respondents saying that long working hours mean they are too tired to properly enjoy time off with their family (the sample included workers in the NHS, Manufacturing and Financial Services sectors). The effect on

home life is considerable: 40 per cent report a negative impact on 'my involvement in family life', 38 per cent on 'enjoyment of my social life', 35 per cent on 'my relationship with my children', and 33 per cent on 'my relationship with husband/wife/partner'. Work not only takes us away from neighbourhood interactions and reduces our free time, but can affect our ability to bond when we are home. Meanwhile, the growth in adult labour force participation and female employment over the last half-century, in particular, has reduced the amount of time that many women, often the ones who were more actively involved in their neighbourhoods, can dedicate to local activities.

More accessible transport and broadening horizons?

In 2001, 73 per cent of households in England and Wales owned at least one car (*Census*), and residential streets are now dominated by cars and often empty of pedestrians. Personal private transport from door-to-door reduces opportunities for local interaction on the street and in local outlets, while opening up a much wider range of opportunities for shopping, work and interactions across a broader geographic range. This can improve quality of life in many respects, but is likely to reduce manifest neighbouring. Public transport is also more accessible than ever before. The percentage of households within 13 minutes of a bus stop with a service at least once an hour is 89 per cent for Great Britain (*National Statistics 1999-2001*), and even higher in London where it is 99 per cent. These figures have increased substantially since the last survey in 1992-1994 when the average percentage for Great Britain was 77 per cent. While this is a particularly welcome change for increasing mobility, more accessible public transport also means more opportunities to spend time outside the neighbourhood.

Fewer possibilities for chance neighbourhood contacts

Chance neighbourhood contacts from living together in a neighbourhood are increasingly unlikely, as social interaction is actively *chosen* from a much wider geographic pool. Comparative evidence from Guest and Wierzbicki's (1999) analysis of the 1974-1996 *US General Household Survey* indicates a slow but continuous decline in social ties at the neighbourhood level. They suggested furthermore that neighbourhood and non-neighbourhood socializing are becoming increasingly distinct over

time, though for some groups there is a positive correlation between the two. Changes in the geographic possibilities of social interaction mean neighbouring has become a much more voluntary activity. While based on US data it would seem likely that similar trends are also underway in the UK where competition from other sources plays an important part in 'taking people' away from their local area.

More comfortable and self contained private spaces

Privatization of the way we live seems to have had as fundamental an effect as de-localization in squeezing out neighbouring practices. In contrast with 1950s working class Bethnal Green for example, the quality, accessibility and range of opportunities now offered in the private space of one's own home, from a proper bathroom, living-space or garden to a range of home entertainment systems and internet activity have overtaken people's previous reliance on public baths, laundrettes, and theatres (although those who have front gardens, balconies and low fences can still interact from their semi-private spaces). One survey in 2000 showed that on average people in the UK spend 2 hours and 48 minutes watching television, video and DVD per day – this has signaled a partial retreat to the private sphere.

More diverse and multicultural neighbourhoods

The New East End updated *Family & Kinship in East London* with a study of Bethnal Green in the 1990s (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006). It reveals that the area is characterized by the fragmentation of previously homogeneous neighbourhoods. Alongside widespread gentrification, the settlement of a large Bangladeshi population in poor urban white areas like Bethnal Green (who arguably have strong 'bonding' capital) has partially contributed to rising tensions and segregation between groups at the local level. The book suggests that the prior close neighbourliness of "natural" identity and solidarity, based on class, faith, and mutual knowledge, has been fragmented and replaced by widespread mistrust and conflicts. This was intensified by fierce competition between the white and Bangladeshi population for housing and school places and limited opportunities for interaction in a shared space. Denominational schools in the areas have further discouraged the full integration of the youngest residents, by leading to a considerable degree of segregation, particularly

between white and Bangladeshi children, thereby inhibiting school-gate interaction between communities. Well-intentioned welfare policies, it is suggested, have often had perverse effects, including contributing to the dismantling of mutual support among white working class families. Language barriers can also breed mistrust: as one resident said, “you hear them when you go down the stairs or in the streets, it’s like whispering behind your back because you can’t understand anything”. But there is some cause for hope about bridging the gaps. Another white resident reported,

“Although I talk a lot about the Pakis, it was the bloke from the paper shop who sent me a card when I was in hospital” (in Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006).

Mutual interests can also overcome barriers.

Living alone

The substantial increase in social isolation and loneliness (defined as not having weekly contact with friends, family or neighbours) must be placed against this background of disconnection from the neighbourhood, in particular for older people. Best estimates suggest that 17 per cent of over 65s are currently socially isolated, and this could increase by a third by 2021 if current trends continue, according to a new *Demos* report called *Home Alone* (McCarthy and Thomas, 2004). With an increasing propensity to live alone now common among people of working age as well as older age groups¹, it remains to be seen whether local social networks become more, not less, important (Palmer, 2006; Bennett and Dixon, 2006).

People are more widely ‘connected’ through technology

In 1970 only around a third of all households in the United Kingdom had a home telephone, but this rose to 95 per cent by 1999-2000, and is now falling only because mobile phone penetration is also at saturation point. These developments have provided a boost to communications at a distance and to private,

¹ Research by Malcolm Williams (2005) shows that while population has grown by 5 per cent over the past 30 years, the number of households with just one occupant is up by 31 per cent. The research points out the propensity to live alone among working age men (25-44) and women (40-50) as well as older people. Palmer (2006) and Bennett and Dixon’s (2006) think-pieces consider the implications of these trends.

one-to-one interactions. Over half (55 per cent) of households in Great Britain (12.9 million) could access the internet from home in July 2005 (*National Statistics, 2005*). It is easier today to be connected with friends and family abroad than it is to speak to your own neighbour, although of course these developments can also facilitate contact locally. However, they also provide opportunities for much more wide ranging social networks that extend far beyond the neighbourhood.

Less welcoming spaces for interaction

The local public realm is often run-down and can fail to offer quality spaces for congregation or casual interaction; also new developments do not always provide the appropriate space for casual meeting between neighbours (green spaces around flats; common recycling space etc). A lack of neighbourhood spaces for interaction can lead to a mutual lack of information: we don't know who our neighbours are and what we might have in common. Small local shops, post offices and third places² have been an importance place for neighbouring encounters (Future Foundation/Royal Mail, 2003). But retail economies of scale have made it harder and harder for small local shops to survive unless they are inventive in their targeting of niches or willing to accept sub-market returns. Meanwhile, there is little for teenagers to do in neighbourhoods (Mori, 2001b) and young people hanging around on street corners precipitate fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, even though this can itself be about young people meeting their neighbours locally, and may partly be motivated by their own concern for feeling safety in numbers.

The literature points to a change in neighbouring behaviour. As lifestyles change, and diversity and mobility replace stability and people spend less time in their local areas, a 'decline' in neighbouring activities is understandable and predictable. It may be that this has little to do with a declining willingness to interact at the local level and more to do with a changing reality. As we will see in the next section, neighbourliness is still important for many people's lives and the 'local' still plays a key role in our day-to-day

² The phrase *Third Place* refers to "the core settings of informal public life." The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gathering of individuals beyond the realms of work and home (Oldenburg, 1991)

activities – the question is how to reconnect people and create opportunities to meet.

3. Why is neighbouring important today?

In the late 1950s, 60 per cent of the population believed that other people could generally “be trusted”. In the early 1980s the figure stood at 44 per cent, and it has now dropped to 29 per cent (Halpern, et al., 2002). Yet ask about neighbours and the answers change:

- 47 per cent of people trust many people in their neighbourhood, and another 37 per cent trust some, while only 2 per cent trust none (*Home Office Citizenship Survey 2003*);
- up to 71 per cent still feel a very or fairly strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood (ibid)
- 42 per cent regularly socialize with neighbours (ibid.); and
- 65 per cent now tend to believe that people in the neighbourhood pull together to improve it (Home Office 2003, *British Household Panel Survey*).

Some of these figures have even been on the rise in recent years. Social scientists explain this by arguing that as our horizons become more global, the value of local rooted and a sense of belonging increases (Amin, 2001; 2002). Making the neighbourhood more welcoming and ‘neighbourly’ is slowly becoming more important again for individuals, groups and society as a whole. But what benefits would a more “neighbourly” neighbourhood bring? The literature shows that neighbourliness can bring a number of benefits including greater happiness, health, improved life chances and opportunities for mutual support and collective efficacy and can contribute to social capital which can have positive impacts on communities as this section explores.

Having good relationships with neighbours makes people happier

The scientific literature suggests ideas of tolerance, reciprocity and trust do not need to be imposed on people:

“Our minds have been built by selfish genes, but they have been built to be social, trustworthy and cooperative”

(Ridley, 1997).

In a sense, it is part of human nature to be 'neighbourly'. According to Richard Layard (2003a,b), for most people it is not money but valued personal relationships with family, colleagues, friends and neighbours that provides the best guarantee of happiness. Layard shows that happiness has not increased in the US, Japan, continental Europe or Britain over the last 50 years, demonstrating that increased levels of production and consumption of material goods do not increase human satisfaction, at least beyond a certain level (ibidem). Mental health, satisfying and secure work, a secure and loving private life, freedom, moral values and a secure community were found to be the main factors affecting happiness (ibid). According to a MORI study in the UK, important predictors of happiness are being retired, talking to neighbours and doing sport (2005). The more people speak to neighbours, the happier they tend to be (even after controlling for correlated factors such as being retired).

Neighbourliness is a framework for both reciprocity and altruism

Philip Abrams (in Bulmer, 1986) discussed the extent to which neighbouring functions as social care or mutual aid, based on notions of reciprocity or altruism. Neighbouring seems in part to be an act from which people derive a sense of wellbeing and personal satisfaction: it makes them feel good in an immaterial but socially valuable way (ibid).

Good relations with neighbours can provide mutual support and help

Neighbours provide each other with practical help, such as the routine exchange of advice or equipment, as well as emotional support. In the US, Warren (1986) has analysed neighbouring and concluded that as public sector assistance declines, neighbours increasingly form a second tier of informal assistance after voluntary services, co-workers and friends. Litwack and Szelenyi (1969) point to the significance of time emergencies and activities that require everyday observation – what they call 'watch and ward' functions which neighbours are best-placed to carry out. Liz Richardson et al. (2005) have also shown that exchanging

people's house keys at the neighbourhood level can help to provide a feeling of safety in recent work on neighbouring in Middlesbrough.

Neighbourliness can have a positive impact on health

Robert Putnam has argued that while social connectedness has been declining, depression and even suicide have been increasing. Much research has shown that social connections inhibit depression. People who have close friends and confidants, friendly neighbours, and supportive co-workers are less likely to experience sadness, loneliness, low esteem and problems with eating and sleeping. Various participants to Putnam's research spoke of how contact with neighbours helps them "feel relaxed", "comfortable, at ease, satisfied". Mounting evidence suggests that people whose lives are rich in social capital (of which neighbourliness is a vital part) cope better with traumas and fight illness more effectively – while neighbours may be far less important than friends and family, they can still play a key role in people's wellbeing. Sociologist James House (2001) concluded that the positive contributions to health made by social integration and social support rival in strength the detrimental contributions of well-established biomedical risk factors like smoking, obesity, elevated blood pressure, and physical inactivity. Bruhn and Wolf (1979) have also studied health and heart disease in Roseto, Pennsylvania where neighbourly behaviour was prevalent through societies, clubs, churches and even congregating on front porches, and it helped to explain the Rosetans' good health and lack of heart disease. They found that people who are socially disconnected were between two and five times more likely to die from all causes, compared with matched individuals who have close ties with family, friends and the community (ibid).

Neighbourliness is good for child development

There is also evidence that child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. Trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer-group and larger community have wide-ranging effects on the child's opportunities and choices, and hence on his or her behaviour and development. Community psychologists have long noted that child abuse rates are higher where neighbourhood cohesion is lower (for example, Vinson and Baldry, 1999). Where civic engagement in community affairs is

generally high, teachers report higher levels of parental support and lower levels of student misbehaviour. Students may perform better when they spend less time watching television: where community traditions of social involvement remain high, children are naturally drawn into more productive uses of leisure than those where social connectedness and civic engagement is limited (Putnam, 2000). While family is certainly the primary determining factor for child development, community support also plays an important role.

Neighbourliness can have an influence on people's chances in life

Social networks, of which neighbouring ties are an important part, can affect the economic prosperity of individuals. People who grow up in well-to-do families with valuable social ties are more likely to succeed in the economic marketplace, not merely because they tend to be richer and better educated, but also because they can use their connections to their advantage. Economists have developed an impressive body of research suggesting that weak ties influence who gets a job, a bonus, a promotion, and other employment benefits. Social networks provide people with advice, job leads, strategic information, and letters of recommendation (Granovetter, 1970s). The role of neighbours in these networks needs further exploration.

Neighbourliness can cut crime and support the collective interest

Studies show that neighbourliness and ties at the local level can help the collective interest. Lower levels of crime can result from neighbourliness, to the benefit of the whole community. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jacobs, 1961), it is clear that social capital is what most differentiated safe and well-organized cities from unsafe ones. Where cities are configured to maximize informal contact among neighbours, the streets are safer, children are better taken care of, and people are happier with their surroundings. This develops a sense of continuity and responsibility in local residents, creating a "web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal and neighbourhood need" (ibid). In areas where people are connected through tight bonds of friendship and looser yet more diverse acquaintanceship

ties, and where people are active in local committees and clubs, there are fewer muggings, assaults, burglaries and car thefts.

Poverty and residential mobility are also factors which influence crime rates, but one study by Sampson et al. (1989) has suggested that while poorer, less stable areas do have substantially higher rates of street robbery, this is not simply because of poverty and instability: rather, these places have higher crime rates because adults do not participate in community organisations and informal social control. Similarly, Ross and Jang (2000) in a large telephone survey of 2,482 Illinois residents found that convivial neighbourly relations acted as a buffer to the wider environment of crime. Neighbourliness can create a sense of security, even in a dangerous neighbourhood. As a respondent in the Manchester's *Neighbourliness Review*³ put it, neighbourliness gives you,

“some sense of being part of something larger, through which you also have a sense of protection”. (2004, CDF)

4. How should we negotiate the balance between neighbourliness, privacy and exclusion?

The benefits of neighbourliness, for the individual and for the community at large, are significant. In a society that is changing fast, good neighbouring can provide social support and help when needed. Life in the neighbourhood may have changed dramatically in the last fifty years, but connections at the local level are still immensely important, in particular for the most vulnerable groups in society who spend most of their time in their neighbourhood. Yet neighbouring, like any other type of social interaction, has its costs and risks. It cannot be flagged up as the answer to every social and health problem, or imposed on people who value their privacy more than they value their neighbours. Good neighbouring is as much about restraint as it is about socialising. Neighbouring can also risk excluding or dividing people.

Intrusive neighbourliness can breach privacy

³ The Manchester Neighbourliness Review is a practical review conducted by the Community Development Foundation in 2004 on behalf of the Manchester Local Strategic Partnership, to assess neighbourliness in a contemporary urban context.

Hoggart (1995) noted that neighbourliness has the potential to be harmful as well as helpful when neighbourly concern becomes intrusive. Studies of relations between neighbours in traditional working class communities note how hard it was to achieve privacy when living at close quarters (Bourke, 1994; Hoggart, 1957). People coped through distancing mechanisms, setting boundaries around matters for conversation and physical spaces for neighbouring. Crow et al. (2002) in their study of 40 residents in a small town on the south coast of England found a split between those respondents who adhered to a privatized, family-centred notion of home and those who drew less tight boundaries around home access. For many residents, privacy was an absolute, and the idea of neighbours popping in unannounced was not welcome.

Inward looking neighbourliness can segregate

Neighbourliness turned inward can in some cases act as a barrier to social inclusion and social mobility ('old boy' networks, networks of people of the same ethnic group in mixed areas; racist or sexist clubs). This is true particularly when neighbourly activity goes on between and within people of a similar ethnic group, ideology or religion. When neighbourly behaviour is skewed toward bonding rather than bridging capital, it can divide communities rather than uniting them, fostering resentment, tensions, segregation and sectarianism. The idea of community is risky today when it relies too much on unity or identity, defined by what it excludes. The passion for community can in fact often flow into dangerous channels of racism, chauvinism and conflict.

Robert Sampson (2004) among others has analysed the 'dark side' of neighbourly community: social networks can and often are put to use for illegal or violent purposes. He offers evidence to prove that strong social ties do not always foster low crime rates:

- In some neighbourhood contexts, strong ties may impede efforts to establish social control. William Julius Wilson (1987) has argued that residents of very poor neighbourhoods tend to be tightly interconnected through network ties, without necessarily producing collective resources such as social control.
- Networks connect do-gooders but also drug dealers. In her study of a black middle-class community in Chicago, Pattillo-McCoy (1999) argues that although dense local ties do promote social cohesion, at the same time they foster the growth of

networks that impede efforts to rid the neighbourhood of organized drug- and gang-related crime.

- Shared expectations for social control and collective efficacy can grow in the absence of strong ties among neighbours. Granovetter (1973) has argued that 'weak ties' and less intimate connections between relative strangers based on infrequent interaction, may be critical for establishing social resources, integrating diverse communities by bringing together otherwise disconnected networks. Weak ties are often denounced as evidence of anomie, but they are key to individual opportunities and social integration alike.

5. Conclusions

In concluding this section, it is clear that:

- neighbourliness and connections with people around us are part of an innate human need to bond. Individuals tend to socialize, and despite the changing family structures and work-life balances, people will always be drawn to other people;
- common interests remain but diversity and mobility have grown, and even knowing one's neighbours is becoming more challenging as changes like a more dynamic housing market, more accessible transport (especially increased use of cars), longer commuting times and working hours, less welcoming spaces and more leisure time choices squeeze out the time people spend in their locality and undermine its conviviality;
- neighbourliness can have an effect on people's quality of life including their health and happiness as well as their safety. In general, the neighbourhood has not lost its importance because that is where our lives are ultimately still being 'lived' out;
- The rhetoric of neighbourliness evokes memories of a bygone age. Equally neighbourliness today is not the answer to every social problem, from the fragmentation of the family to political disengagement. Too much bonding can lead to segregation, and too much active neighbourliness can lead to resentment when people's privacy is breached. The best approach may be to create a framework of conditions that help residents to be neighbourly *when* and *if* they want to be.

Section 2

Which factors influence modern neighbouring?

The literature and survey research on neighbourhood relations helps to clarify the conditions that can better enable the development of neighbourly behaviour and facilitate interaction. The way people behave is influenced by a complex array of factors that can facilitate or hinder neighbourliness. The percentage of time spent by residents in a neighbourhood, the composition and mix of people living in a neighbourhood, the type of housing and the accessibility, as well as the quality of the public space, can substantially influence whether a local area will be neighbourly or not. Very few reviews unambiguously identify practical measures that can favour neighbourliness; even an excellent literature review recently compiled by Bridge, Forrest and Holland (2004) omits the role of traffic speed, the built environment or the challenge of neighbourhoods divided by ethnicity, segregation or generation gaps.

This section summarizes what we know about the different extents to which residents interact depending on their own characteristics and the character of their neighbourhood. Like any human phenomenon, neighbourliness is motivated substantially by personal factors. Survey correlations can give an insight into laws of the average, but cannot reveal the nuances of individual behaviour⁴. But while the analyses that follow are broader generalizations rather than universal truths, they can nonetheless provide some pointers for considering neighbouring activity through examining the different factors that can shape social interaction at the local level.

1. Socio-demographic factors

The kind of people living in a neighbourhood seems to affect the kind of social interaction that takes place there. According to Campbell and Lee (1982), individuals in “well-integrated” groups (married couples, educated, high income) tend to have larger social networks than people with no children or partners. At the

⁴ Moreover, in many cases – displaying neighbourliness is different from valuing neighbourliness. However a certain basic level of actual neighbouring appears essential for its practical impacts and latent efficacy to build up.

other extreme, people with low income and/or a low level of education also tend to have very intense relations with their neighbours, due to greater need for local support and social bonds (Riger and Lavrakas, 1981; Buckner, 1988; Campbell and Lee, 1992).

- Neighbourhoods with **children and young families** (Nasar and Julian, 1995) tend to have a higher level of neighbourliness due to both need and available time of children and mothers to make connections with others in the park or in the primary school, or with their immediate neighbours. Guest and Wierzbicki (1999) in their US survey show that those who had the greatest local ties were those who also had a large number of children (Also see Riger and Lavrakas, 1981; Unger and Wanderman, 1982; Buckner, 1988; Nasar and Julian, 1995; Skjaeveland, Garling and Maeland, 1996). Young families spend a lot of time in their local area and are more likely to give or receive favours from neighbours than those without dependent children⁵. Therefore they are a key neighbourhood 'connector'. Unfortunately the preference being given to 'small apartments and homes', designed for couples and single people in much of urban Britain, may limit opportunities for families to play a role in the renewal of run-down city centre neighbourhoods (Silverman; Lupton and Fenton, 2006).
- Neighbourhoods where there is a **nursery school or primary school** are amongst those that are more likely to be 'sociable'. According to Jupp (1999), schools and nursery schools are by far the most important local amenities for meeting other people. His study of mutual support between residents of different tenures from 10 estates in the UK showed that schools generally act as a powerful catalyst for families coming together.

⁵ However, Office for National Statistics data (2003) shows that young people between the age of 16 and 24 are the least likely to speak to their neighbours regularly, know or trust the people in the neighbourhood, or to have done or received a practical favour from a neighbour, and were more likely to report that their neighbours did not look out for one another. While this may be a natural aspect of life paths, it presents some cause for concern.

- Studies also show that despite significant changes in the labour market composition, **women** still play a key role in connecting people at the local neighbourhood level (Unger and Wandersman, 1982; Skjaeveland, Garling and Maeland, 1996). Women who have children, are retired or in part-time work, in particular, tend to have a smaller pool of extra-neighbourhood contacts and a stronger and more intense pool of neighbourhood contacts. Surveys like the one recently conducted by the Manchester Neighbourliness Review (2004) also show women being more likely to trust their neighbours (22 per cent) than men (14 per cent). While one needs to be cautious in handling such data, it is interesting to note that studies still show women to be, by and large, mainstays of neighbourliness.
- Streets or neighbourhoods largely populated by **home-owners** seem to be more conducive to neighbourly relations (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan and Wandersman, 1986). A more secure material interest in the community, in the up-keep of the neighbourhood or property can lead to more and better involvement in local social networks (Blum and Kingston, 1984; Pratt, 1986; Forrest and Alan, 1991; Rossi and Weber, 1996). In the Manchester Neighbourliness Review, 54 per cent of those who agreed that they like to keep themselves to themselves in their neighbourhood were social renters whilst only 30 per cent of those who had a mortgage on their property agreed (CDF, 2004).
- Neighbourliness is particularly important for those who spend more time in the neighbourhood. The Manchester Neighbourliness Review (2004) showed that people whose employment status meant that they spent a greater proportion of time within their neighbourhoods (**flexible workers; unemployed; housewives** etc) scored very highly on the neighbourliness index (also Guest and Wierzbicki, 1999). Neighbourliness levels are usually low in areas where there are a high proportion of second homes or commuters. Studies show that **elderly people**, who spend a significant proportion of their time around their homes, highly value social relations at the very local level (Guest and Wierzbicki, 1999; Nocon and Pearson, 2000), but are also very likely to be lonely. The 2001 General Household Survey shows that for those respondents aged 70 and over, 88 per cent spoke

to neighbours more than once a week, compared with just 67 per cent of people aged 16-29. Frequency of speaking to neighbours increases with age, particularly when people are less mobile and need support from others around them. Age related problems, like deteriorating vision and hearing, or physical frailty can intensify older people's reliance on neighbours who can provide low cost alternatives to contacts and resources elsewhere (Lee, Campbell, Miller, 1991).

- Even if local ties are generally weak, **households with long-term residency** tend to have more connections and richer mutual support networks (Buckner, 1988; Chavis, Hogge and McMillan, 1986; Skjaeveland, Garling and Maeland, 1996). In the US context, Lee, Campbell and Miller (1991) discovered that long-time residents in a neighbourhood in Tashville, Tennessee had larger networks of more intense relationships. Those who had long-term roots in the area, with local extended families, had built up lasting local friendship networks. According to British national statistics (ONS, 2002), people who had lived in their area for less than 5 years were twice as likely to have no close friends or relatives living nearby compared with those who had lived in the area for 20 or more years.
- US research suggests that in some cases **ethnic minority groups** may form stronger social relations at the local level. Lee, Campbell and Miller's research (ibid.) showed that black Americans in Tashville, Tennessee interacted with their neighbours more often than whites and in more different ways. Blacks were in touch with neighbours almost every day, a frequency of roughly one and two-thirds that of whites. Neighbour relations were more instrumental than casual, entailing the exchange of information, support and assistance, whilst for white Americans short conversations predominated. These contacts were also more functionally significant to blacks, who had less access to information, assistance and support from alternative sources. According to the study, black neighbouring behaviour and the norms that govern it are born of necessity, but also "a cultural reflection of the group's historical experiences". In Britain, surveys and studies have shown that ethnic minorities particularly value and rely on social networks at the local level, and often have extended kin and close friends living in

close proximity (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006), though it is unclear how far neighbouring activities and experiences vary by ethnicity. The Manchester Neighborliness Review (2004) showed that in Manchester the group who was most likely to get on with all or most of their neighbours was Asian/Asian British (56 per cent). Dench, Gavron and Young (2006) in the restudy of the East End, suggest that the kinship basis of the Bangladeshi community helps to determine high levels of neighbouring and social connections, but this is not always positive, particularly when it can lead to self-segregation and is reinforced by language barriers and tension with other residents.

- The degree and breadth of neighbourliness in a neighbourhood can also be influenced by **the socio-economic status of its residents**. While data on this particular aspect of relationships is scarce and often based on small samples, studies have revealed distinct class differences in neighbouring styles. Higher income people seem to know more of their neighbours and like them better, but they visit them less. In Logan and Spitze's research, casual familiarity (Christmas cards through the door; greetings in the street, etc) seemed to mainly characterize middle class neighbouring whilst working class people had more intense relationships with fewer people. The Manchester Neighbourliness review (2004) recorded that almost a third of respondents who had lived in their home for 10 years or more held their neighbour's key, and in a recent small study of four estates across England (Bastow et al., 2005), this figure rose to 47 per cent, while 80 per cent did favours at least once a year and 60 per cent monthly. These figures are considerably higher than findings nationally, perhaps because of the socio-economic circumstances and relative boundedness of estate life in the study areas. According to the Office for National Statistics, in the most deprived wards people are more likely to speak to their neighbours daily (33 per cent) compared to people in the least deprived wards (19 per cent). This may be because in poorer neighbourhoods, people rely on informal networks and mutual help more than in wealthier areas. But people living in the 30 per cent most deprived wards much less neighbourly than those living in the other 70 per cent – they

are more likely to speak to their neighbours but are least likely to trust them (ONS, 2002).

- **Geography** seems to also play a role in how people relate to their neighbours. According to national statistics (2002) people in the North-East were most likely to speak to their neighbours daily (40 per cent), people in the North-West and South-West were most likely to trust their neighbours (60 per cent and 65 per cent respectively) and those in the South-West were most likely to have received a favour from a neighbour (79 per cent). London is generally found to be the area that features the lowest levels of neighbourliness, which may be because of its high levels of mobility and anonymity.

2. Social capital and social efficacy

While socio-demographic factors mostly occur by 'chance', in the sense that the composition of a neighbourhood is not something that can be easily influenced, levels of crime, safety, trust and governance can be effectively and actively turned around to make the neighbourhood a more friendly area to live in and interact. The relationship between some of these factors and neighbourliness is a complex one, however. The less trusting, the more insecure and unsafe you feel, the less neighbourly you may be⁶. On the other hand, stronger connections with neighbours, coupled with collective action and social capital, can go a long way to make people feel that they have someone to rely on in case of crisis, or to work with to improve the local area. It may be the neighbourhood problems themselves that propel people into action on a common concern and create the basis for establishing ties between people.

- **Safety** is an important element in people's sense of wellbeing. Feeling unsafe can have two effects in a neighbourhood: it can unite people (e.g. to fight crime collectively) or it can intensify the feeling of mistrust. A BBC research survey, for example, showed that twice as many people think a neighbour that keeps an eye on their home is better than an alarm system (2006). Three quarters of people think that a neighbourhood watch scheme is effective in preventing crimes such as burglary; and there are now 150,000 schemes covering about

⁶ Note here that we look at trust *as one of the* elements that may be conducive to neighbourliness but we recognise that people can be neighbourly without trusting.

6 million homes. Anti-social behaviour and crime are two of the main concerns of people across the country (36 per cent of the 1007 people interviewed by MORI in 2004). The feeling that neighbours can be trusted to watch homes, or help in case of burglary, can therefore play a very important role in making people feel safe and improving their quality of life.

- **Satisfaction with the local area** can be a basis for neighbouring relations, but so can the challenge to improve it together. When things can be actively done to improve the local area or when the local area is a pleasant place to spend time in, people are more willing to engage with others and take part in activities. On the other hand, high levels of dissatisfaction with the neighbourhood are not conducive to spending time with neighbours, or engaging in local area activities. Annette Hastings (2005) shows that when environmental services fail to clean up the graffiti or the dirt, residents tend to lose heart and motivation to look after their surroundings and a sense of collective efficacy can be lost.

3. The physical environment

The design, management and maintenance of the physical environment also plays a significant role in modulating the space for human interaction. Cul-de-sacs, porches, balconies onto the courtyard, multi-use buildings and larger pavements can all create opportunities for meeting and interaction. Equally, an unfriendly environment, with no space to talk, badly lit parks and where cars dominate the landscape, can have detrimental effects on quality of life in general and on neighbouring behaviour in particular. As CABE recognizes, however, while changes to the built environment can contribute to transforming neighbouring relations, by themselves they are not the solution.

- Neighbourhoods where **public space is well maintained and safe** can create a better basis for human relations. As the *Urban Task Force* 2005 report suggests:

“well-designed and maintained public spaces ... are the foundation for public interaction and social integration, and provide a sense of place essential to engender civic pride.”

Multi-use parks that can be used for more than one activity (as playgrounds; for walking; with benches and ice cream parlours for example) tend to attract a more diverse pool of people (also Comedia and Demos, 1995). In Cattell and Evans's (1999) study of two estates in East London local resources and facilities were found to be key influences on the neighbourhood's store of social capital. They help to develop supportive networks and relationships of trust, and encourage participation. **Shops, cafés, youth clubs, sports and social facilities** were generally associated with the potential for a better quality of life and a more socially cohesive community. Residents in one locality welcomed proposals for 'sitting out' areas behind tower blocks, hoping they would help bring back 'community spirit'; they also welcomed on-going plans for new community social facilities, such as a community hall, café and sports facilities, seeing them as a potential means to bring together diverse groups. Tims and Mean (2005) suggest that, **car boot sales, allotments and supermarket cafes** are the sites currently acting as social hubs in many of our cities and more should be learnt from these sites about how to encourage social interaction in our public spaces – including how to stimulate opportunity for novelty, surprise, display, exchange and other activities⁷.

- **Local shops** are also important for neighbourhood socializing. With increasing numbers of cars per capita, people tend to use out of town shops and drive for miles to shop at the nearest major supermarket or DIY store. Not only has this had a significant impact on the life of the local corner shops but, accompanied by the mass closure of many pubs and post offices in many neighbourhoods around the country, it has also limited the possibilities and chances of meeting people from their locality. Old people and families with young children would particularly benefit from local shops and, in general, studies show that good shops in neighbourhoods are a highly valued source of local satisfaction and pride (see The Newspaper Society, 2003).

⁷ While shops and third spaces can encourage connections, they are rarely the place where people meet their neighbours for the first time. According to Jupp (1999) evidence from a study of 1000 residents of 10 different estates shows that the function of third spaces is to cement relationships with existing friends and acquaintances rather than as forums for meeting new people.

- The spatial arrangement of neighbourhoods does not only involve public space but also **accessibility and legibility** (i.e. ease at finding a way around). Anderson (1992 in CABE 2006) argued that a community can emerge from the **pedestrian street**,

“through the routes people take in meeting an average day’s basic needs and desires. The **newsstand** where one buys the Sunday paper, the store one runs to for a quart of milk, and the streets one travels on to visit a friend”.

US based studies have found that pedestrian tertiary or small residential type-streets are primary tools for neighbourhood organization, despite being largely ignored by planners and scholars (Grannis, 1998). Lund (2002) confirmed this by evaluating one ‘traditional neighbourhood’ and one modern suburb in Portland, Oregon using the psychological sense of community scale developed by Nasar and Julian (1995). Through hierarchical regression, it was determined that variables related to the neighbourhood pedestrian environment, contributed significantly to this sense of community, above and beyond important demographic factors. In other words, a pedestrian-oriented environment in terms of a continuous network of sidewalks, streets lined with trees offering shade to walkers, and a nearby pedestrian-friendly shopping district, contribute significantly to establishing a ‘sense of community’ among residents.

- **Cars** have in recent years occupied a large part of our streets. While residents of new housing estates would ideally give up their garden for an extra car parking space (CABE, 2005), planners are increasingly realizing that car free areas better encourage connections. The same is true for speed restrictions; areas which have traffic calming measures and low traffic flows are more conducive to neighbourliness. A MORI poll (1999) showed that for those respondents who felt that something was ‘wrong’ with their neighbourhood, road safety and speed of traffic were top of the list, of the 1076 people interviewed 30 per cent felt these were issues. While there is limited empirical evidence on the relationship between traffic and public space use (Williams and Green,

2001), it is quite clear that heavy traffic can prevent streets from being used for social interaction.

- It is not only public spaces and streets that are important for community relations at the local level but also the **houses** we live in. Skaeveland and Garling (1997) emphasize the importance of the front garden or veranda as a semi-public space that encourages sociability with a feeling of control and some distance for both parties. Brown, Burton et al. (1998) have demonstrated the significance of the **front porch as a semi-public space** in which non-threatening and non-intrusive neighbourly relations can be initiated and reproduced. Similarly, the participants in the surveys carried out by the Manchester Neighbourliness Review (2004) pointed out that most social contact is in the adjoining gardens with **low walls and hedges**. **Cul-de-sacs** are also features particularly favoured by residents. While planners do not encourage them (CABE, 2005), some scholars have argued that they are conducive to neighbourliness (Festinger, 1950). **Space is also usually the key** – a structured open space, semi private space, low dwelling density as well as **unobtrusive lines of sight** (which avoid, where possible, overlooking people's gardens or living rooms) can help create a sense of good interaction while maintaining precious privacy.

Conclusions:

Neighbouring is a complex phenomenon – it is not prescriptive and is not dependent on any one factor. This section has reviewed the many possible elements, which, according to the available evidence, can shape the development of good neighbourly relations. Successful neighbouring derives from a combination of socio-demographic factors (i.e. the people who live in an area); social capital dynamics, and physical conditions (i.e. the built environment and public space). The literature shows that:

- neighbourhoods where there are children, nurseries or primary schools, elderly people and a high percentage of home-owners tend to be more neighbourly than others;
- feelings of safety, and the ability to count on neighbours to watch over the house in case of absence, are key to high levels of satisfaction with an area. Satisfaction in turn

increases the willingness of residents to get involved in their local areas and to participate in local activities and organizations. Good council and neighbourhood governance can go a long way to help residents feel that they should 'engage' more in their area. Engagement is really a key to meeting people and developing meaningful links, as well as to getting things done;

- finally, neighbourhoods that are people-friendly and have well designed, well kept public spaces, where people can spend time outside their homes, are usually successful in providing the opportunity for residents to 'use' and enjoy their local areas and to meet other residents. Local shops, car boot sales and markets can also help to bring people together.

While the interaction between different groups at the local level is difficult to predict and requires further research (particularly, residents' interactions in diverse neighbourhoods), practical action could change the way the physical environment or social capital shape and modulate human interaction⁸. Reducing crime or re-designing public spaces to facilitate interaction may not be the solution to everything but may encourage residents to spend more time in their local area and reconnect with neighbours.

⁸ Some of which is being considered in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Public Spaces Research Programme.

Section 3

Policy and practice implications and directions for future research

As highlighted throughout this think-piece, there is strong potential demand for neighbourly behaviour; most people feel they belong to their neighbourhoods and that plenty of their neighbours can be trusted (MORI, 2001). However, neighbouring practices, from participation in organizations to conversations on the street, are in decline, not always because of a lack of will but sometimes a lack of occasion for contact. Competition from less local kinds of interaction has squeezed out much neighbouring, but this is partly because barriers make it relatively harder or a less attractive alternative. Some of those barriers could be addressed simply by applying well-known design lessons; others by social innovation to extend the range of available options.

The supposed Golden Age of close neighbouring rooted in strong ties has been largely replaced by a more diverse and individualistic life-world. But today, forms of neighbouring based on weak ties have considerable potential to contribute, albeit in a more bounded way, to residents' quality of life and happiness.

As highlighted in this think-piece, compared to fifty years ago, neighbourliness today, like most social interaction, is principally a question of social choice. The more clearly that residents can see opportunities of neighbouring and the more easily that they can take them up, the more they will be likely to do so. Weak-tie neighbouring will necessarily be structured in the first instance around brief interactions, possibly leading toward common projects, activities or interests. These can also provide grounds for new kinds of solidarity. People are motivated to neighbourliness not simply by material interest, but also by social or altruistic value and the desire to belong. Many people will nonetheless continue to prefer other kinds of interaction. Neighbourliness should not be enforced, but instead encouraged.

Social frameworks and physical environments could enable interaction in neighbourhoods more, and obstruct it less. Neighbouring can be facilitated by providing places for people to meet and new ways for them to discover common interests, to

establish relationships and engage in mutual exchange, support and small collective acts. The question is: how can we support neighbouring practices that are rooted in weak ties, bringing familiar strangers together while respecting their differences and privacy?

One important caveat is that neighbourliness is not very amenable to large-scale national policies. The local, fine-grained detail is more important for bringing people together. For this reason, the most important condition would be to give local areas the widest range of possible options and encourage a good understanding of what could be done locally and why.

We do not yet have enough evidence to understand fully the potential of weak-tie neighbouring, or the impact of policy and practice interventions under all circumstances, so the proposals made below should be treated with care, and further research will in many cases be necessary. The ideas below follow from the literature review presented in this think-piece and parallel policy work by the authors, but are by no means intended as a complete agenda.

Social architecture: institutions and innovation to bring people together

The social institutions of family, identity and a tightly-bounded life-world once provided firm grounds for neighbouring, helping people to come to know one another and providing the basis of mutual trust. The secondary associations that sprang up in their wake, from gardening to book clubs, often failed to sustain themselves given competitive pressures from private life and the state. However, given strong and possibly increasing public interest in the very local level, it is worth revisiting what social architecture might help support neighbouring and collective action in the new environment of weak ties, individualism and competitive demands on time.

Create vehicles for local information sharing:

- There is evidence that mechanisms for **local knowledge and information-sharing**, if well-designed and used by a reasonable number of residents, can help people build up weak ties and identify common interests. These can range

from newssheets and free notice-boards in local shops to email groups and internet sites of varying sophistication (see below). A simple 'who's who and what's what' of the neighbourhood is often valuable for new residents in helping to orient them. There is evidence, in particular in the research of Barry Wellman at MIT on *Netville* and the *i-Neighbors* programme, that the provision of internet services to a neighbourhood can help build weak ties faster (2002). This seems in particular to be true not of the technology itself, but of associated email lists, collaborative content and forms of social software. Services that offer recommendation-based information about local services ('find a plumber'), local eBays or timebanks, or help people with shared interests find each other locally, could have significant impact. Such approaches are being piloted, for instance in the *Digital Shoreditch* project (digitalbridge.co.uk). Such technologies can have perverse impacts if not carefully planned: in Shoreditch, there is presently some concern that a CCTV system to which local residents have access will be used by thieves to establish when householders have left their homes.

- Neighbours who are retired, child-rearers or not full-time employed could take on the role of **local 'concierges'**, **'mavens'** or connectors who can dispense particular kinds of information, either on a voluntary basis, as in Sheffield's *Burngreave New Deal for Communities*, or be paid small amounts if the role grows.
- **Neighbourhood events** such as street parties, festivals, fêtes or collective celebrations of holidays can help people to get to know their neighbours and build a feeling of community spirit. There is also a question of how commuters can be more closely involved in their area, perhaps through weekend activities, and of opportunities for flexible and home workers to meet each other during the day in a café or a local resource centre.

Encourage engagement:

- A recent study of **incentives for informal social control** on four British housing estates (CASE, 2006) found that worry and low confidence were the main inhibitors of social interaction, while participation in neighbourhood life and perceptions of

authorities (police, etc) were key determinants of people's willingness to intervene. Changing positive incentives in a mechanical way seemed to have little impact and most respondents were sceptical about the morality of this approach. They thought that **making it easier to report and punish anti-social behaviour** and measures such as upgrading local homes had a real impact. However, it is not completely inconceivable that a more 'fun' and publicly acceptable approach to incentives, potentially even local television reality programmes offering collective prizes to those neighbourhoods in which mutual knowledge or neighbouring behaviour increased most, could help build a bandwagon of interest.

- It is also worth considering the supply and accessibility of local places for encounter and association. **Extended schools**, libraries open at more convenient times, community shops or pubs and faith centres that offer themselves as a resource to the whole community can help reinforce neighbouring.
- A number of viable opportunities may exist for more mutual services at neighbourhood level based on simple social innovations. **Collective services** for streets, blocks and villages could either be designed-in or resident-initiated, and might include wireless internet, group laundrettes, collective composting, even cooking facilities (as in some Scandinavian housing developments) or as technologies advance, street-based distributed power generation. Caution is however advised as, when they are too centrally-planned, such services often fall foul of individual preferences and behaviour.
- Local public services (GPs, police) could also play a more engaged role in connecting neighbours to each other and to changing their perceptions of whether the authorities are on their side.
- Transport is a key challenge. A simple initiative to set up group bicycle sheds in a street could help to prevent theft, and might even be extended to shared vehicles for elderly people in rural communities who are unwilling to give up their mobility. **Hybrid childcare mutuals and nurseries**, or a group au-pair system, if appropriately guaranteed could fill a market niche while also helping people to find each other. **Public health** too is an area

where mutual neighbourhood clubs could play more of a part than they presently do in the UK, just as villagers in China can join neighbourhood *tai chi* practice in the park.

- Finally, there is some evidence that **neighbourhood governance**, in particular where it involves real power or influence, can help support association and neighbourly behaviour over time. Putnam's study with colleagues (2003) of Portland, Oregon indicated that measures to support and respond to neighbourhood associations acted as a stimulus for residents to get to know each other and resulted in their being three or four times more likely to be civically engaged across several measures than the average American.

The built environment and public spaces

While the character of physical space will at best act as a platform to facilitate neighbouring, a badly-designed or poorly-maintained neighbourhood can become a major obstacle to interaction. Design on its own cannot solve social problems or lack of neighbourliness but it can facilitate encounter. Some suggestions include:

Design for private perceptions and use:

- The locally distinctive **character** of neighbourhoods is important as it can help people to develop a sense of belonging, identity and shared value. It can be supported through good design, local landmarks, common spaces and symbols. A failing identified in past social housing projects was the inclusion of spaces that had no clear ownership, fostering dereliction and conflict. Neighbourhood space benefits from clear ownership, and accordingly from **enclosure** which demarcates public from private space. Intermediate kinds of spaces can contribute positively to neighbouring interactions: front gardens, porches and balconies are private but provide opportunities for interaction. They also support 'active street frontages', or what Jane Jacobs called 'eyes on the street' (1961).

Improving the maintenance of the public space:

- The custodianship and maintenance of the quality of **public space** is a challenge to which there are different responses, ranging from CCTV to neighbourhood wardens or friends' groups. But commonly owned spaces like gated alleyways and squares or cul-de-sacs can also play a part in supporting very local neighbouring. Cul-de-sacs in particular are in great demand with home-buyers, though there is here a trade-off against the less understood value brought by ease of movement: strangers and passers-by can help to keep streets populated and safe, and a **permeable and legible** network of streets and public spaces is necessary if people are to be able to walk through neighbourhoods with ease, safety and pleasure.
- **Spaces for social encounter** are a key condition for neighbouring to take place, and can take many forms – from park to health centre, from street-corner to hairdressers. Public and open spaces with a variety of purposes can become obstacles if they fall into dereliction, but where they are well-designed and maintained they are a key environment for neighbouring and for attracting families and children in urban centres (Silverman et al, 2006). Local shops, pubs, cafés, markets and playgrounds where people can interact informally, do not necessarily encourage new meetings, but can reinforce already existing connections. '**Neighbourhood hubs**', ideally flexible and multi-use buildings that may bring together public services with community space and business, can help to concentrate local 'footfall' and provide a focus for neighbourhood interaction.
- Traffic-calming, pedestrianised areas, wider pavements, seating, public toilets, public art, trees, better signing, street-sweeping, footway repairs, graffiti-removal and lighting can all **encourage people to walk around their neighbourhoods**. However, the most common walk in British neighbourhoods today may well be the short distance from the front door to the parked car.
- **More mixed-use residential areas** can be encouraged to include shops, offices and services, both to broaden the range of things to do within walking distance and to increase the buzz on the street, as well as to offer adequate choice for residents.
- **Home zones** are inspired partly by experience in the Netherlands, where over 6,500 home zones or *woonerfs* have

been introduced since the late 1960s. These use extensive redesign to give people more priority over traffic. Recent pilots in the UK did not evaluate the impacts on neighbouring behaviour, but an integrated approach that not only reduces traffic speeds and relocates parked cars to open up the street for people on foot, but also introduces pocket playgrounds, public space, planting and benches is thought to have a positive impact, not least in opening up streets again as places for children to play. The role of local people in helping to decide and own such changes is an important consideration if they are to have optimal impact.

There are dilemmas of policy and practice here. Public demand for homes, neighbourhood facilities and lifestyles is in some respects out of kilter with the characteristics that would support a more neighbourly society – most obviously around cars, for which people are at present willing to give up gardens and public space. While supply shifts can to some extent shape demand, they also have limits, and policy and practice around the built environment also needs to tap into the evolution of public attitudes and lifestyles.

Directions for future research

While institutions like the ESRC funded Centre for Neighbourhoods Research has produced valuable research related to this subject, there is nonetheless not a great deal of systematic or broad comparative research on neighbouring in contemporary Britain. While a number of intriguing small-sample studies have been conducted recently, among others by housing providers, large-sample and longitudinal information is less comprehensive in its scope. While the *Home Office Citizenship Survey* includes some detailed neighbouring questions, the *British Household Panel Survey* conflates “friends” and “neighbours” unhelpfully. It is not possible to compare simple questions nationally, such as how many people do not know the names of any of their neighbours.

Given that neighbouring is a complex phenomenon which may mean different things in different parts of the country or over time, we could benefit from a larger basket of measures for it, perhaps even a universal neighbourliness index.

This think-piece has raised a number of issues for Britain today, which could represent future directions for research on neighbouring:

Neighbouring and social capital

- What is the relationship between “bridging” and “bonding” interactions in neighbourhoods, and how is it affected by different demographic, governance or spatial configurations?
- What kinds of neighbouring practices and social capital best support collective efficacy or latent neighbouring (the capacity to respond to challenges when required)?
- Network analysis could be conducted in a number of neighbourhoods to establish who the key connector individuals are in each case.

Neighbouring and sense of belonging:

- How can a strong sense of neighbourhood belonging be fostered? What impact does belonging have on neighbouring attitudes and practices? (It could be hypothesized that a sense of belonging, as distinct from more abstract ideas such as “having a stake in” the neighbourhood, will help significantly to determine attitudes.)

Neighbouring and change:

- What is the impact of population diversity on neighbouring behaviours and mutual trust over time (longitudinally)? What other variables can help to determine the impact of diversity on neighbourly behaviour and mutual support? There is cause for concern in this area, which is worthy of careful investigation.
- What is the impact of major changes such as gentrification or regeneration on neighbouring?
- What kinds of neighbourly behaviour are particularly relevant or useful in different kinds of neighbourhoods, say: a poor inner-city area, a diverse neighbourhood with high levels of ethnic tension, a commuter belt area, and a wealthy neighbourhood? How do they vary?

Neighbouring and spaces for interaction:

- What are the impacts of different forms of internet and non-internet information-sharing and exchange systems on neighbouring and the establishment of weak ties?
- What public or common spaces, and what social practices, play a particularly important part in helping people to connect with their neighbours?

Neighbouring and local governance:

- What is the impact on neighbouring on the different ways in which local public services and employees engage with citizens?

Neighbouring and psychology of residents

- What impact does neighbouring behaviour have on people's sense of safety or loneliness?

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