

# WHO WATCHES THE WATCHERS?



What started out as a crime prevention measure has caused a war between neighbours that is driving communities apart, reports **Phil Frampton**

Recently a circular appeared through my door. It read: 'The Grindley Avenue grapevine (neighbours who talk to neighbours) has identified some individuals who are using Neighbourhood Watch as a front for nocturnal snooping and surveillance; taking photographs of their neighbours covertly, monitoring our behaviour and activities and the frequency and nature of our visitors. This is anti-social behaviour.'

'Neighbourhood Watch is about protecting neighbours against crime and criminal activity... We need to question whom we are entrusting to enforce criminal law.'

The circular went on to argue that 'evidence' collected against one family to secure their eviction, represented only a snapshot of that household's life and was contradicted by the support expressed by their immediate neighbours.

The circular claimed that a couple, who had recently moved on to this Manchester council estate, had upset other households after setting up a Watch scheme that had little or no focus on issues concerning the residents.

One long-standing resident complained that the Watch organisers shouted at him for walking his dog on a route that he had used for almost 20 years. Another expressed concern that they appeared intent on driving out a single mother, not for noise or violence but for her lifestyle, and also taking photos of children, commenting: 'These are self-appointed witchhunters and bullies.'

At the same time a couple in their mid 70s have installed a security camera, overlooking their car parked on the street outside their house. The husband says

that the camera is there to protect his car from neighbours' children. Nevertheless, because some say the security camera is there to film everybody going in and out of the avenue, this vulnerable couple may be endangering themselves. In these parts, being rumoured to be a police snoop is not a way to protect one's person or property.

The issue of ensuring that we feel safe and secure in our own homes and neighbourhoods is currently in flux. Neighbourhood Watch and Police and Communities Together (PACT) schemes, gated communities, CCTV cameras,

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Asbos and community police are being offered as solutions.

What is certain is that home secretary Jacqui Smith's recent announcement of a plan to vastly increase the number of Neighbourhood Watch schemes around Britain caused no one to jump for joy.

We all want our homes and neighbourhoods to be free of burglaries, vandalism, muggings and violence, but it is doubtful if Watch schemes are the answer. Such schemes can only work where there is active communal interest and buy-in by the majority. Otherwise democracy disappears, allowing the minority to become a self-appointed group of busybodies whose access to police resources can undermine policing by generating a climate of mistrust

and cynicism, rather than enhancing the role of the police.

To feel secure in our homes we need to feel that we are not threatened by our neighbours; that our right to privacy and security is respected by those around us. In the wrong hands, Watch schemes can create a greater climate of fear.

Take the case of a quiet street in Stretford where long-standing resident, Walter Allen, told me how most of the residents used to look out for each other, making sure that cars weren't tampered with and looking after elderly or infirm neighbours.

When one man decided to organise a Watch scheme, it soon became discredited. A resident complained: 'The coordinator would refer matters he considered to be of concern to the police without any reference to other members of the scheme. He even took to videoing young people on the street, claiming that they were acting suspiciously, and was accused of fabricating stories about people dealing in drugs.'

'He reported neighbours' cars if they were parked in front of his house, and once requested that the police tow away a car. He claimed it had been dumped outside his house and left there for months. In fact the car had been parked for just 48 hours by someone staying over at a friend's house a few doors away.'

Manchester's Chorlton Liberal Democrat councillor Norman Lewis argues that Watch schemes are not the answer for the more deprived estates.

'There are not many schemes around here. For years there's not been a lot of confidence in the police. Just recently my aunty was burgled and the police took three days to visit her.'

'I was once asked to set up a Neighbourhood Watch on my estate, but

I couldn't even get it off the ground on my own street. I believe that half of all crimes are not reported on this estate. We need the schemes in areas of high crime but we haven't got them.

'It needs the total support of the community. Too many people around here don't inform the police about crime. We have the criminal community who see reporting crime as grassing, and the decent people who are worried that reporting crime could endanger them.'

Instead, Lewis believes that more police on the beat has helped to reduce crime: 'The introduction of police community support officers has been the key. They do a great job around here because they are visible and accessible. They need to break down fear of being associated with the police.'

'Confidence in the police is slowly building in the community. If it continues then eventually people will be confident to take control of the community. Neighbourhood Watch can empower people, but some individuals take it too far. It's for the whole community to stand up for itself.'

Alarming, the Home Office appears to be heading in a different direction, which could imperil policing in Britain by bitterly dividing communities. Hertfordshire chief constable Frank Whiteley, spokesman for the Association of Chief Police Officers, recently urged chief constables to use Watch schemes to further assist policing, and revealed pilot schemes that have already involved secret spying on suspected criminals, patrolling crime-hit estates at night and even checking car tax discs.

Already, there are covert Watch groups, who do not display membership stickers in their windows but meet in secret with the police. In Cumbria, the Neighbourhood Watch even sent letters to convicted criminals warning them not to trespass on private property.

Critics suggest that government proposals to cut police numbers are behind the Home Office plans to bring together the nosy parkers of our neighbourhoods into secret armies.

Where Watch schemes do not have the support of the majority, particularly in areas of high crime, the impact of such actions is likely to isolate Watch supporters. Consequently, the safety of Watch supporters is likely to come under threat, strengthening the hand of criminal and hooligan elements rather than undermining them.

In encouraging self-appointed armies on to the street, the police must be aware that the criminal element will do the same. With decreased police numbers well-meaning civilians could find themselves completely unprotected.

The central issue, as Lewis declares, is not of spies and private armies but of

'the whole community' standing up for itself and its interests. Neighbourhood unity is at the core of successful anti-crime schemes. It generally arises out of a commonly perceived threat to people's property and safety, but the focus of successful schemes often stretches beyond the issue of crime to improving other aspects of neighbourhood life.

Twelve months ago, when Zelda Lewis, a resident of a sleepy owner-occupied suburb in the seaside resort of Southport, had been woken from her sleep for the umpteenth time by vandals, she and her neighbour decided it was time to act.

'Last year, a lot of people around here became really frightened,' Zelda told me, 'Youths were coming into our gardens late at night and causing all manner of damage and noise. They pulled my rosebushes out, and woke up my family. They pulled out neighbours' flower beds, broke and stole garden ornaments, kicked down fences and damaged walls. It wasn't just the elderly who felt intimidated.'

'We arranged a lunchtime meeting with the police in our local church hall and about 16 people turned up, plus three police officers and our local councillor. The police promised to put on extra patrols and told us what we could do, and one woman became our Neighbourhood Watch organiser. We had three meetings like that and the councillor came along and updated us.'

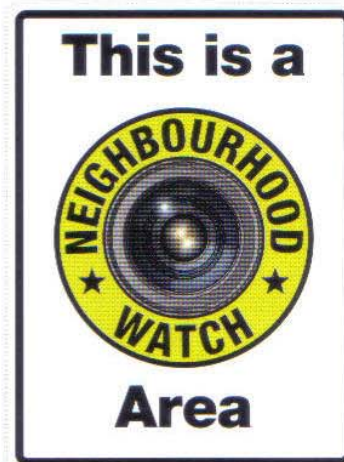
'The meetings proved successful. We even got a bus shelter out of it. Neighbours who had lived there for years introduced themselves, and we exchanged contact details so we could warn each other should we spot anything happening again.'

The efforts of residents and police soon restored peace to the neighbourhood. Residents' meetings have ceased but the police visit the church hall every fortnight and people know that if there is trouble they can contact them there or call their new Watch organiser.

Zelda pointed out: 'People are more approachable now. They know they have helped to make a difference and when people see positive things happening it gives them more confidence.'

Yet one is left to speculate as to whether even Zelda's Watch scheme and the sense of community it engendered will gradually die a death as residents gradually stop feeling threatened and new residents are no longer welcomed into the area and seen as a vital community resource.

Hilda Kester lives in a settled working class community in north Manchester. Faced with housing crime and vandalism, she and her neighbours took a different approach, which illuminates the strengths of successful community schemes. They opted for a residents' group that aimed at tackling not only pressing crime issues but also improving their neighbourhood.



'There are three streets of terraced houses where we live that have alleyways backing on to each other. The alleys had always given us trouble, with people dumping rubbish, urinating, letting their dogs defecate or scrawling offensive and even racist graffiti. Sometimes we had to dodge cans and bottles tossed into our backyards, and occasionally the alley entries were used for burglaries.'

'We proposed gating the alleys with only residents permitted to have the keys. When every household expressed a willingness to pay £60 each for the gates, we set up a local residents' group to secure permission and assistance from the council and the police. Gating the alleys soon became more than simply a crime issue, it was about improving the environment residents lived in.'

The residents' group brought the community together. The council agreed to contribute by cleaning up the alleys and removing graffiti. The group secured £10,000 of European grant funding to tarmac the alleys, establish small garden areas and put up hanging plants and other garden decor.

'We wanted to make it a pleasant and safe area and now it is a lot quieter, the rubbish and graffiti have gone and the parents are happy for their children to play together in the alleys.'

Occasionally residents have a day when everybody turns out to do some cleaning and planting. The alley gating has not only reduced crime, it has brought the community further together and ensured that it can act not just on crime but on other areas of concern to the neighbourhood.

Democratically based residents' groups brought together to tackle residents' varied concerns such as in this North Manchester example could pose a much more secure way forward for households than spies, hidden cameras, and covert operations led by curtain twitchers and stalkers.