

CO-OPERATIVES UK



## Co-operative streets

Neighbours in the UK

*Ed Mayo*

“The UK already has a big society of neighbours looking out for each other.”

**“Love your neighbour, yet pull not downe your hedge.”**

George Herbert, *Outlandish Proverbs* (1640)

## Happy neighbours, happy home

Do neighbours matter? All we tend to hear about are problem neighbours and noisy neighbours. In a world of connectivity, we assume that friends are the new neighbours and that, just as we choose what to wear, we choose who to be in contact with.

In terms of culture, we are increasingly rootless. But in terms of house and home, little has changed. One in three people live in the same town in which they grew up and a further one in three live within a radius of fifty miles.<sup>1</sup> What is more, while it is easy to take co-operation with others for granted, there is a growing body of evidence that if we get on better with those who live around us, then we are happier and healthier ourselves.

**Children thrive more and schools fail less in areas where neighbours get on.**

A comprehensive review, for example, led by Nobel Prize-winning economists Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, in 2009 examined new measures of social and economic progress. They concluded that: “for no other class of variables (including strictly economic variables) is the evidence for causal effects on subjective well-being probably as strong as it is for social connections.”<sup>2</sup>

They also cited findings, for example, showing that the more people get to know their neighbours, the lower that the levels of crime are in their area. You don’t need to have a neighbourhood watch in your local area, although that can help, but you do need to know who your neighbours are. Similarly, they argued, children thrive more and schools fail less in areas where neighbours get on.

## Research on neighbours

Findings like this have helped to generate research on what makes for a good neighbourhood, and what makes for a good neighbour.

As Mae West joked, “love thy neighbour... and if he happens to be tall, debonair and devastating, it will be that much easier.” Academics have created conceptual frameworks for research, such as ‘social capital’ and, more recently, ‘social network’ analysis.

Debate in the media on neighbourliness, how well we get on with those next door, has had, not surprisingly, less rigour. Problem neighbours, anti-social behaviour and all manner of disputes do make good stories. “My nan” as one young person told me recently “has taken all her four neighbours to court and she’ll tell everyone about it.” It is easy to dub people as ‘neighbours from hell’ without considering what that also says about where you live. The Office of National Statistics confirms that concerns on anti-social behaviour are on the rise, but also stresses that it is behaviour on the street, rather than over the garden fence that explains this.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps as a result, recent years have seen occasional opinion polls, often sponsored by banks and insurance companies, on whether we are neighbourly or not and who comes out top across the UK. The big cities, like London, are the best for neighbour relations on one... and the worst on another. The poor are more active, considerate neighbours than the rich on one ... and the other way around on another.

**This survey is fundamentally different, because it provides a thirty year comparison of how the UK has changed in terms of the relationship with our neighbours.**

This survey is fundamentally different, because it provides a thirty year comparison of how the UK has changed in terms of the relationship with our neighbours. The original survey was run in 1982. It was conducted by Market and Opinion Research International, now known as (IPSOS) MORI, and reported in the Sunday Times. The research also fed into a landmark study – Co-operation: the basis of sociability, written by Professor Michael Argyle and published by Routledge.

By comparing data from 1982 and 2010, we are able to draw a rigorous and comprehensive picture of the change in the state of neighbours in the UK over this time and better understand what we see today<sup>4</sup>

## Key findings

### The UK is half as neighbourly as it was three decades ago

- The Good Neighbour Index that we have developed is based on the total number of people helped by their neighbours divided by the number whose neighbours have given them problems.
- On this index, the UK is less than half as neighbourly in 2010 than it was thirty years ago (1982 index score – 3.6; 2010 index score – 1.8).
- In 1982, the majority would speak to their neighbours at least once a day and we would know the names of six more neighbours than we do today.
- In 2010, the majority of us speak to our neighbours less than once a week.
- One in two Britons (49%) say that people now know more about the daily activities of their favourite celebrity than they do their neighbour.

**TABLE 1: Then and now**

	1982	2010
People who say that at least one of my neighbours often calls in for a chat	59%	22%
People with friendly neighbours	56%	68%
People who have problems with their neighbours	22%	44%
People that find it easy to start up a conversation with strangers	78%	21%
Average number of neighbours people know by name	13	7

### **A concern about 'stranger danger' is prevalent among adults now and not just children**

- We find it far less easy to talk to strangers. A generation brought up on the notion of 'stranger danger' as children now live out their adult lives as if that were true.
- We are four times less willing to start up conversations with complete strangers – a drop from an average of 78% across a range of social settings to 21% today.
- The easiest place to talk to strangers is in a pub or at a party – but pubs and parties are not what they were thirty years ago – four out of ten people (40%) find it easy to speak to strangers in a pub compared to seven out of ten (72%) in 1982.
- Those in the North of England are the most easy-going, with many more finding it easy to talk to strangers.

### **Even so, the UK is still a neighbour-friendly nation**

- Overall, the number of neighbours willing to help out is no less than three decades ago.
- There are new ways to be a good neighbour. While the number of people looking after neighbours' pets or plants has halved over thirty years, over thirty million people now take in parcels for their neighbour.

- We see our neighbours less, but we like them more. We see them as more sociable, caring and friendly, although we also see them as more nosy...
- Across the UK, there are at least twenty one million conversations taking place each day between neighbours.
- Fourteen million people drop round for a chat with their neighbour.
- One in four people keep a spare key with the neighbours.
- We know the name on average of seven people who live in our direct neighbourhood – with women knowing one more on average than men.

**TABLE 2: National trends for neighbour co-operation (1982 – 2010)**

Neighbours who...	Trend	% change	2010
do shopping for me		-82%	6%
look after my pets or plants		-51%	23%
keep a spare key for me		-42%	27%
do gardening for me		-38%	6%
do DIY for me		252%	7%

### Scots make good neighbours

- Scotland ranks highest of the UK nations on neighbourliness (2010 index: 2), followed by Wales, then England, then Northern Ireland.
- Scots know the names of more of their neighbours (8.4 neighbours). In England, those who live in the North know more of their neighbours' names, Londoners the least.
- However, the opposite is true when it comes to friendships. Londoners have the highest number of close friends (5) and Scots the lowest (4.4).
- Wales scores well on both neighbourliness (the names of 8.4 neighbours) and friendships (5 close friends).
- Over half of people in Wales speak to their neighbours every day – the most regular across the UK. Whether for that reason or not, though, Welsh people are most likely to see their neighbours as nosy.

**TABLE 3: Neighbours by region (2010)**

	Number of neighbours you know by name	Number of close friends
Scotland	8.4	4.4
Wales	8.4	5.0
North	7.1	4.4
Northern Ireland	7.1	3.2
Midlands	6.8	4.8
South	6.6	4.6
East	6.4	4.6
London	5.5	5.0

### **The UK already has a big society of neighbours looking out for each other**

- A significant number of people take steps to keep an eye on someone else in the neighbourhood who is elderly or disabled – 26% keep an eye on non-relatives and 11% keep an eye on relatives (compared to 6% in 1982).<sup>5</sup>
- The majority of those who have been widowed (78%) or who are separated or divorced (66%) describe their neighbours as friendly.
- People are twice as good at helping out, for example with small bits of DIY (15% compared to 7% for all), when there is a widow next door.
- Pensioners tend to be the best neighbours. There are good opportunities, as they see it, to get to know their neighbours and seven out of ten (71%) say that most people in their neighbourhood are friendly.<sup>6</sup>

### **However, there are a growing minority of 'never neighbours' – people with no interest in contact or helping people living next door – and 'nuisance neighbours'**

- The numbers of 'never neighbours', people who will never call round next door, has increased by over a half (from 26% in 1982 to 43% today).
- The number of people reporting problems with their neighbours over the last two years has doubled (from 22% in 1982 to 44% today).

- We tend to have more problems with our neighbours' children than we do their pets. The top five gripes, in order, are: noise,<sup>7</sup> bad behaviour, children being a nuisance, overhanging trees and bushes and pets.

### **The more you work, the less you see your neighbours... unless you are unemployed**

- Those in work tend to rely more on help from their neighbours but see less of them – they are more likely, for example, to get help looking after pets or watering plants.

### **Working part-time gains you close to two more neighbours that you know.**

- Working part-time gains you close to two more neighbours that you know (5.9 compared to 7.6). Working part-time is also good for the community – you are fifty per cent more likely to keep an eye on someone in need locally (45%).
- Around two out of five people who are retired also keep an eye out for neighbours who are not relatives but are in need of help.
- Being unemployed might give you more time, but it does little to cement relationships. One in five people who are unemployed (21%) say that they know none of their neighbours, compared to only 6% for all. Around half of people out of work (45%) say that they only see their neighbours by accident.

### **And having children results in having more neighbours but less friends**

- Those with two children know their neighbours best of any household.
- However, the more kids you have, the more nosey you tend to think the neighbours are.
- Having children equates to having less close friends – statistically, after the first child, you lose half a close friend for every extra child you have.

## **Conclusion**

### **The level of neighbourliness has declined significantly over three decades.**

Changing patterns of work, tenure, travel and household composition have all no doubt contributed to that. But, despite the advances in communication, always-on and always in-touch, we are all still neighbours and the reciprocity of contact, conversation and assistance across the garden fence or front drive is still a major driver for co-operation and trust in Britain today.

This research confirms that you don't need to love your neighbour, but it does help to get on.

## Notes

1. For the most recent confirmation of this, see [http://www.mortgageintroducer.com/mortgages/237573/5/Industry/Home\\_really\\_is\\_where\\_the\\_heart\\_is.htm](http://www.mortgageintroducer.com/mortgages/237573/5/Industry/Home_really_is_where_the_heart_is.htm)
2. Stiglitz, J., Sen, A., Fitoussi, J-P., Commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress, 2009
3. Only four per cent of people see their neighbour as a serious problem for them in terms of their local area. [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/Social\\_Trends38/Social\\_Trends\\_38.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends38/Social_Trends_38.pdf)
4. The MORI Research was conducted between 25 to 29 November 1982, with a sample of 1,801 adults interviewed across GB. The 2010 research was conducted by YouGov, with a total sample size of 2,167 adults. The survey was undertaken online between 11 to 13 May 2010. One per cent of respondents to the 2010 survey report having no neighbours – these are excluded from the response rates therefore set out in this report.
5. Neighbours are included in national statistics on informal carers, but not in a way that is separated from 'friends' more widely. Informal carers are adults or children who provide any regular service or help to someone who is sick, disabled or elderly, but not in a paid capacity. See [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/Social\\_Trends39/Social\\_Trends\\_39.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends39/Social_Trends_39.pdf)
6. Trust in neighbours tends also to increase with age. See [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/Social\\_Trends33/Social\\_Trends\\_33.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends33/Social_Trends_33.pdf)
7. Loud music and barking dogs are the most common reasons for complaints to local authorities about noise nuisance from neighbours in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, according to the National Noise Survey 2005. There were similar results for the Noise Survey Scotland. See [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/social\\_trends37/social\\_trends\\_37.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/social_trends37/social_trends_37.pdf)

THE AUTHOR

---

Ed Mayo is Secretary General of Co-operatives UK.

## Co-operatives UK

Co-operatives UK works to promote, develop and unite co-operative enterprises. It has a unique role as a trade association for co-operatives and its campaigns for co-operation, such as Co-operatives Fortnight, bring together all those with a passion and interest in co-operative action.

Any organisation supportive of co-operation and mutuality can join and there are many opportunities online for individuals to connect to the latest co-operative news, innovations and campaigns. All members benefit from specialist services and the chance to network with other co-operatives, whilst for new co-operatives, Co-operatives UK provides low cost registration, free membership and free advice on legal structures and governance.

[www.uk.coop](http://www.uk.coop)

---

*This New Insight* was launched during Co-operatives Fortnight.

Co-operatives UK would like to thank the sponsors of the Fortnight: The Co-operative Group, Midcounties Co-operative, Midlands Co-operative, The Southern Co-operative, Anglia Regional Co-operative Society, Chelmsford Star Co-operative Society, Lincolnshire Co-operative Society, Channel Islands Co-operative Society.

Comparing data from 1982 and 2010, **Co-operative streets: Neighbours in the UK** draws a comprehensive picture of the change in the state of neighbours in the UK over this time and enables us to understand patterns of neighbourliness we see today.

CO-OPERATIVES UK



Holyoake House  
Hanover Street  
Manchester M60 0AS  
Tel: 0161 246 2900  
[www.uk.coop](http://www.uk.coop)

Published 2010

Design by Calverts • [www.calverts.coop](http://www.calverts.coop)