

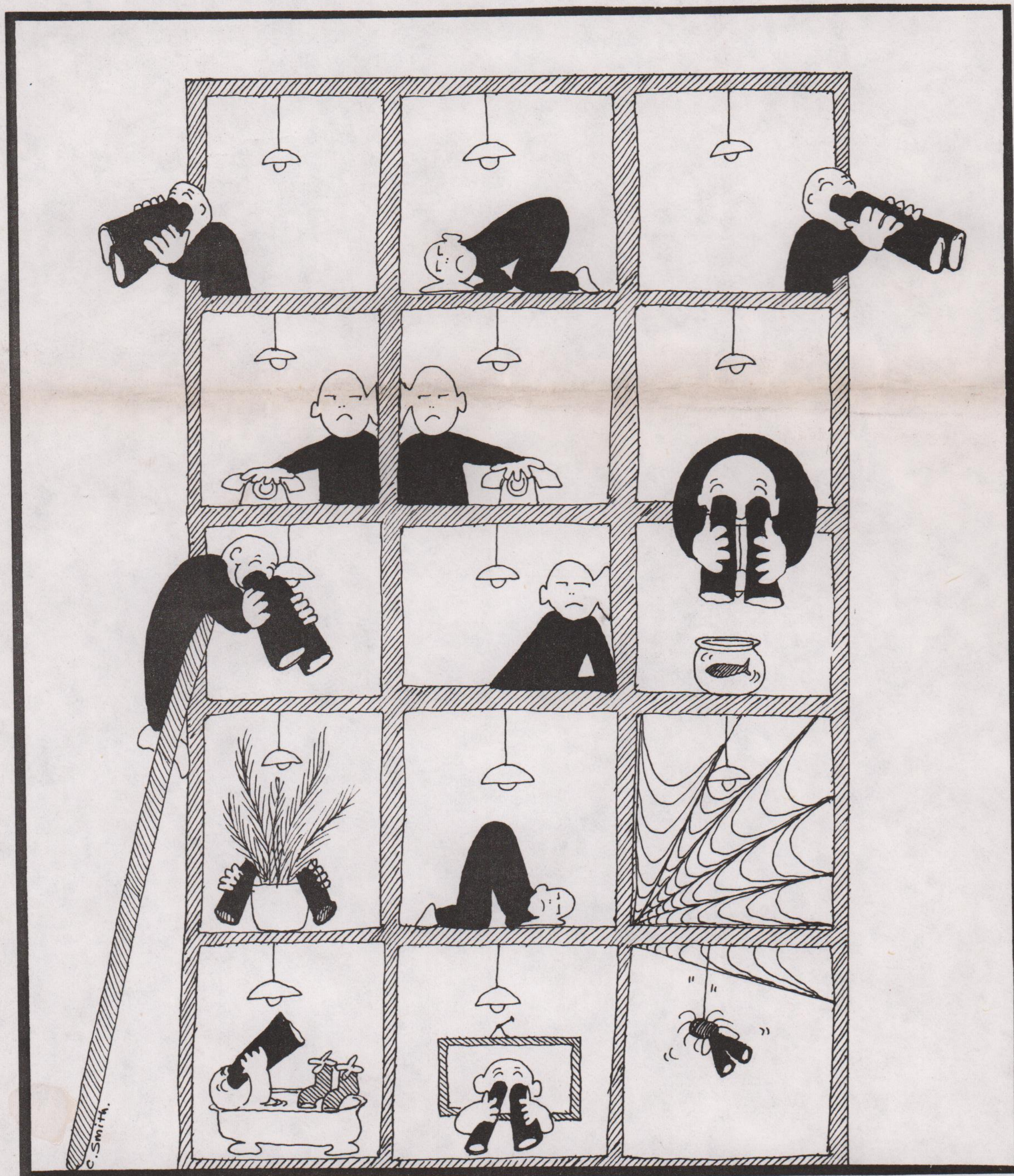
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the libertarian research and education trust

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Research Project
Neighbourhood Watch Scheme

INFORMATION PACK



Research Projects:

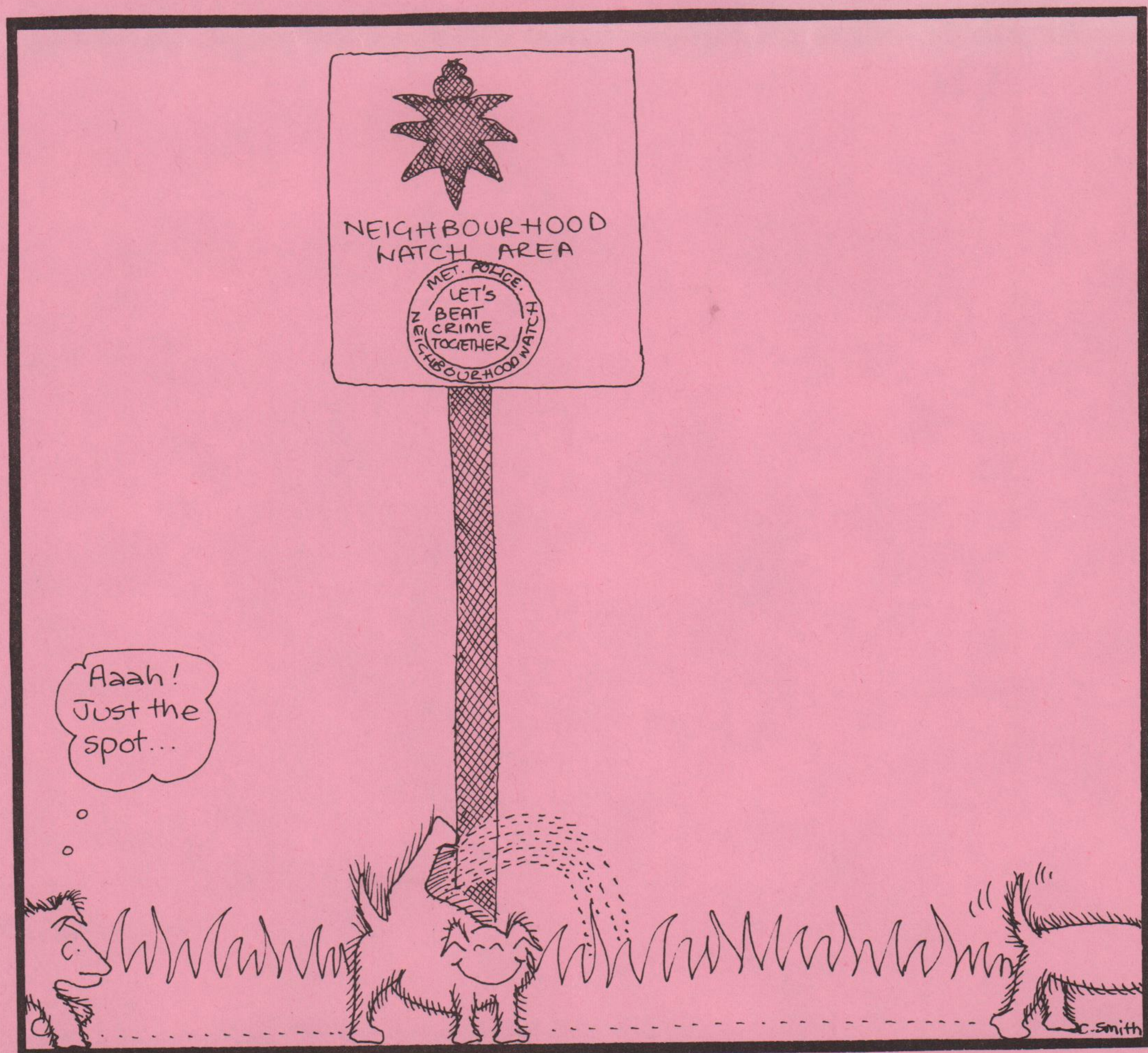
Trustees: L.Bridges, L Grant, P.A.Thomas. Charity No: 282624

INTRODUCTION

Crime is a very serious problem in London, especially in inner London. Many women are frightened of sexual assault and harassment. Many Asian families' lives are blighted by racist attacks and abuse. Many elderly people will not go out after dark because they do not feel safe.

In recent years people have demanded that the police do more to prevent crime. In September 1983 the Metropolitan Police launched a crime prevention scheme called 'neighbourhood watch'. The police present it as a major step forward : a scheme in which the public is given a special role in stopping crime. But others claim it is glorified 'grassing', and that it encourages neighbours to spy on each other.

The Libertarian Research and Education Trust is an independent research organisation funded by the GLC to look at the effects of neighbourhood watch on the lives of Londoners. New neighbourhood watches are being set up every day, often with only a handful of local people knowing what it involves. This Information Pack gives basic information intended to help you form your own opinion of the scheme, and to decide for yourself what it will or will not offer your neighbourhood.



WHAT IS NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH ?

Neighbourhood watch is a crime prevention scheme which originated in the USA. It is now the Metropolitan Police's major crime prevention initiative. It involves the police and public working together to fight crime, especially burglary. The police see it both as a way of improving police-public relations and as a means of reducing crime. The police have called it a new 'partnership' between police and public.

The police describe it as "a scheme for ordinary home and car owners who want to protect themselves and their community from burglars and thieves". It involves 3 components :

1. People in an area getting together to act as the 'eyes and ears' of the police. It involves people being vigilant, looking out for 'suspicious' characters and vehicles and informing the police.
2. A property marking scheme. The police will lend neighbourhood watch schemes kits so that residents in the area can mark their property with their postcode and house/flat number. If this property is stolen and then recovered by the police it can be easily returned to its owner. The police give people window stickers which tell would-be burglars that the property is marked. This is supposed to deter criminals.
3. Free home security surveys. When the schemes are set up the police will usually offer to visit any household in the area and make recommendations for improving domestic security (eg better locks on doors, window locks, perhaps a burglar alarm etc).

There is a fourth component which is mentioned only in police documents. That is, the use of Special Patrol Group (SPG), District Crime Squad and District Support Unit officers to concentrate on "known burglars" in the area as a scheme is being set up. This is not mentioned in any of the publically-available promotional publicity for the scheme, and the police never talk about this 'hidden' component at neighbourhood watch meetings.

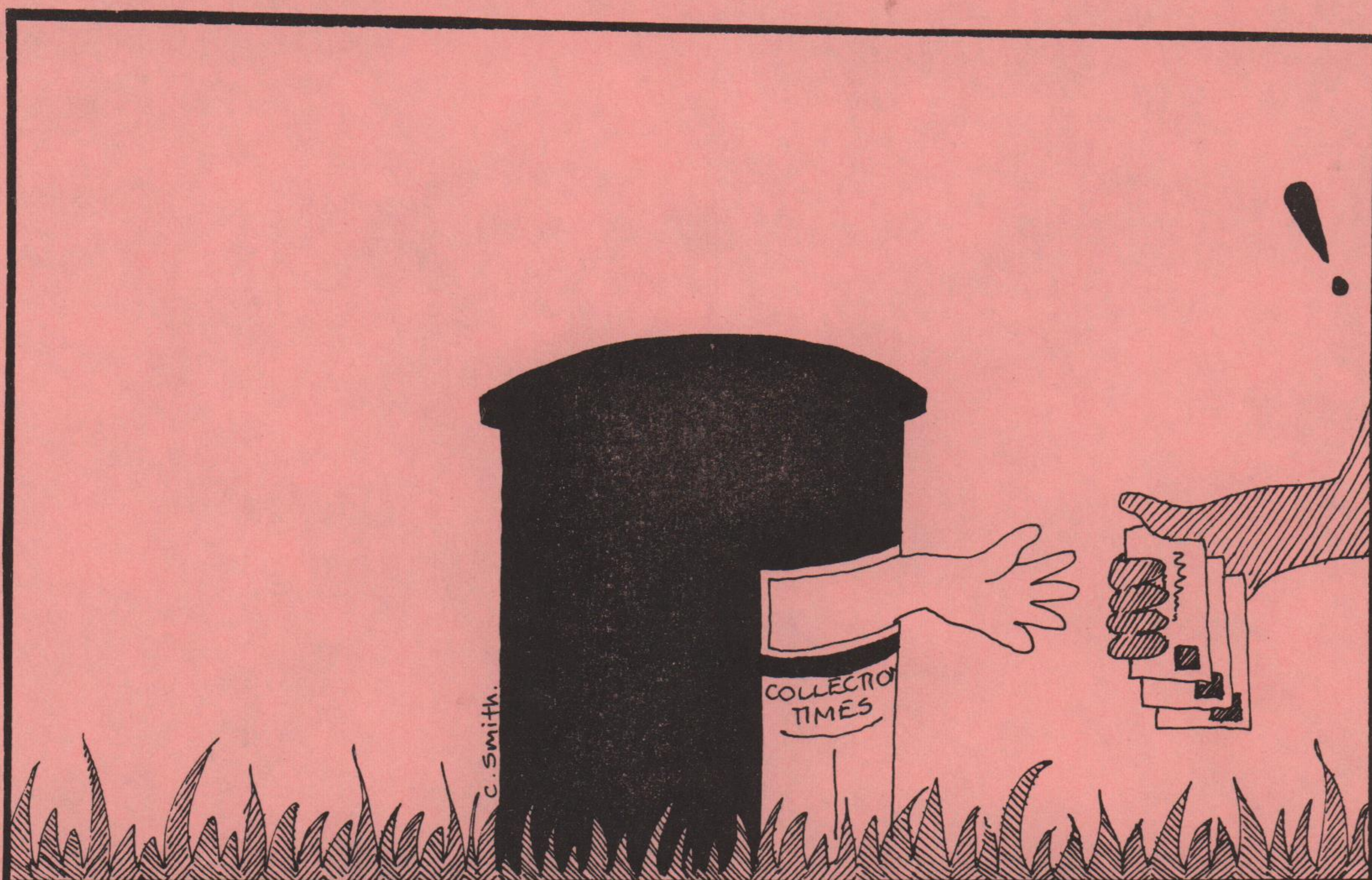
HOW IT IS SET UP

Schemes can be set up either at the suggestion of members of the public or by the police. To begin with the police will have established contact with a few local residents (often members of the Residents or Tenants Association). So before starting a scheme the police will usually have a 'nucleus' of a possible neighbourhood watch scheme. The police will also have informally chosen an 'area co-ordinator' (see below).

Schemes are normally set up officially at a public meeting for the residents of an area, whether it be a street, a number of streets, or an estate. After they have got a small core of people interested in the scheme, the police will distribute leaflets advertising a public meeting. At the public meeting the police will explain the scheme and answer any questions. Often they show a video in which Shaw Taylor explains neighbourhood watch and property marking.

The police will ask the meeting if it wants to start a scheme. If the meeting decides it does want one, the police will ask people to volunteer as street or block co-ordinators. Each street or block will have at least one co-ordinator. The area co-ordinator will be the main contact between the police and the scheme. The street co-ordinator is the link between residents and the neighbourhood watch.

The scheme is generally presented as a way of improving neighbourliness and of reviving 'community spirit'. However, it has proved very difficult to set up the scheme where there is no existing 'community spirit' (unfortunately, like many inner-city estates). Most schemes are set up where there is already a Tenants' or Residents' Association, and therefore, where some 'community spirit' already exists.



NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH IN PRACTICE

If neighbourhood watch has widespread support in an area, and all 3 components are used by most people then the scheme may well reduce crime. It is very difficult to be certain of this because the crime statistics used by the police are based only on crimes which are reported to the police. Crime statistics do not accurately reflect actual crime. However, the scheme might reduce people's fear of crime even if the actual level of crime does not fall.

In July 1983 Scotland Yard issued 'guidelines' to local police telling them how to set up the scheme. These guidelines do not consider the possibility that the scheme could go wrong or be misused. There are a number of things, which could have been included to make sure that the scheme was not misused, which are not mentioned. It is a matter of debate if this was deliberate or not. Below are some possible problems :

1. The guidelines do not say how many people must support the scheme before it is started. Some police stations insist on 40% support within an area. However, Chief Superintendents in Stoke Newington and Tottenham have said that they would support schemes of only two people in a street.
2. The guidelines do not say that those involved in the scheme must be representative of the neighbourhood as a whole. For example, there is nothing to stop an all-white scheme being set up in a multi-ethnic area.
3. The guidelines do not say that racists, bigots or the power-hungry should be stopped from becoming co-ordinators.

It has happened that, for one or more of these reasons, the scheme has made things worse in an area and not better. In theory, there is nothing to stop a few racists getting together and forming a scheme with full police backing.

Also, the police say they do not want neighbourhood watch members to patrol the streets. But this does happen and some police stations seem prepared to turn a blind eye. In Stoke Newington the Chief Superintendent supports such patrols.

Generally, in an area with no real social tensions neighbourhood watch can be successful. But in an area where there are tensions it is unlikely that people will unite behind a neighbourhood watch scheme. In this situation neighbourhood watch may make matters worse.

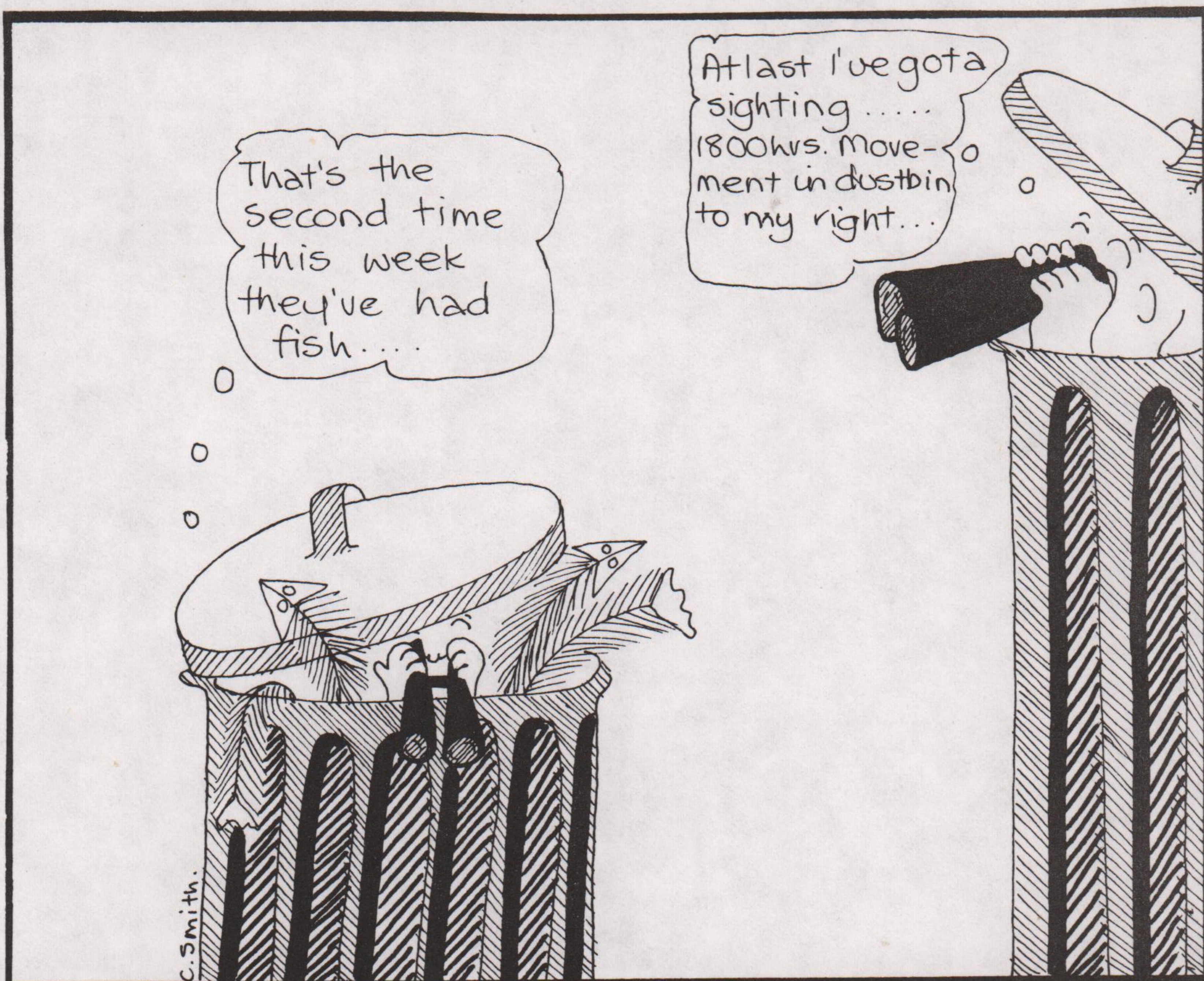
NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH AS A POLICY

The components of neighbourhood watch are meant to deal with burglary. So the scheme is designed for those with property to protect. It depends on people having property which they think is worth marking, and being able to afford new locks etc. This has meant that neighbourhood watch is mainly set up in middle-class, owner-occupied areas where relatively few crimes are committed.

In high-crime inner-city areas, especially council estates, many people do not see what neighbourhood watch has to offer. They do not think they have much valuable property and cannot afford better home security (anyway, what is the point of better door locks if the council don't replace the rotten door frame?).

In any case, in high-crime areas many people are more worried about their personal safety on the streets than about their property. Some people will not go out at night because they are frightened of being attacked, not because they think their home will be burgled if they leave it. So neighbourhood watch does not address the main problems facing many inner-city inhabitants.

As a major crime prevention policy, neighbourhood watch deals more with low-crime areas than with high-crime areas. This means that, overall, its effect will be small. It seems to us that any major crime prevention policy should be directed at areas where crime rates are high. A crime prevention policy must be suitable for these areas.



NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH AND CRIME

The main argument in favour of neighbourhood watch, as presented by the police is that it will reduce crime. It is important to remember 2 things :

1. Although reducing crime is important it must be balanced against other possible effects. It is not true to say that anything that reduces crime is a good thing.
2. The scheme's effect on crime varies a lot.

Undoubtedly neighbourhood watch does reduce crime in some areas. But there are a number of points one should think about when the police talk about neighbourhood watch reducing crime :

1. The police often claim that crime has dropped as much as 50%. Unless you know the number of crimes involved this tells you nothing. For example, a drop from 4 to 2 crimes is a 50% reduction, but the number is so low that it is meaningless. If the police say there has been a big percentage drop in crime somewhere ask how high the crime rate was in the first place.
2. There is some evidence that crime is not reduced but instead moved from one area to another. Rather than commit a crime in a neighbourhood watch area a burglar might just break in somewhere else. This is fine for the residents of the neighbourhood watch area but does nothing to solve London's crime problem as a whole.
3. Many schemes enjoy a 'honeymoon' period when they are first set up. Everyone is enthusiastic and makes the scheme work. Then after a few months people begin to lose interest (they've had their property marked, improved their home security, what else is there to do ?) and the scheme may collapse.
4. Every neighbourhood watch is different. They have different levels of support. They face different problems. They do not apply all components to the same degree : some emphasise property marking more than others, some stress keeping an eye out, some have street signs. For all these reasons the effect of the scheme will always be different.

All in all, neighbourhood watch may cut crime, but it may not. It may not be the best way to cut crime in high-crime areas.

IS THERE ANOTHER WAY ?

As was said in the introduction, crime is a big problem, especially in inner-city areas. The poorest people suffer most from crime : not the rich. Something must be done to reduce crime.

Unfortunately, neighbourhood watch might not be the answer. In America, where the scheme came from, it is now widely accepted that for crime prevention to work it must :

- a. Deal with the specific problems facing a particular area.
- b. Identify and use the resources which exist within that community to cut crime.

Neighbourhood watch does not do this : it is a standard scheme which is supposed to apply to all areas however different they may be. In America neighbourhood watch was not the huge success that some people claim : some did work, but others didn't.

Also, before the public will co-operate with the police they must trust the police. It could be said that neighbourhood watch is one way of building trust. But in Detroit, where the scheme was successful, the police were reformed in line with public demands and then they set up neighbourhood watch. In inner-city, high-crime areas many people, rightly or wrongly, are deeply suspicious of the police.

The aim of this Information Pack is to provoke discussion. There is no single way to cut crime immediately. It depends on the area. In high-crime, inner-city areas (the areas most in need of some sort of crime prevention) it may be that some of the following things could help. These might be more useful than neighbourhood watch :

1. Forming a Tenants/Residents Association. Discussing as a group the problems that face the area and what can be done to solve them.
2. Getting the council to make improvements to the area. This could involve putting in entry phones (for blocks of flats), improving street lighting, putting in stronger doors with better locks.
3. Examining what the police are doing. Do they respond when called ? Do they spend a lot of time arresting people for offences that no one else cares about ? Are they dealing with the things that local people want them to do ? This might involve trying to get the police to change their tactics.
4. Looking at who causes the problems in the area. Is it mainly kids ? What is there for kids to do in the area ? The answer might be to try and get a youth club or other facility opened.

MORE INFORMATION

This is a short Information Pack produced by the Trust to introduce the main issues involved in neighbourhood watch. The Trust has produced more detailed information in the form of Working Papers. These are available from the Trust on request.

If you want more information do not hesitate to write to or telephone Julian Scola or Harry Donnison at the Trust (at 9 Poland St, London W1, or 01 434 4220).

Also, we would be very interested to hear your experience of neighbourhood watch, or of police attempts to set up a scheme in your area.

FURTHER READING

There has not been very much published about neighbourhood watch which is worth reading, and most of it is very difficult to get hold of. Below is a reading list of some of the more informative and readily-available material published to date :

'Neighbourhood Watch. A note on implementation.' by Lorna F. Smith. Published by Home Office Crime Prevention Unit, July 1984.

'Policing London' (magazine of the GLC Police Committee), Numbers 12,14 and 16.

'Eyes and ears of the police' by Phil Thomas, in 'Rights' (magazine of NCCL), August 1984.

'Neighbourly nosing' by Christian Wolmar, in 'New Statesman', 21 September 1984.

'The Safe Neighbourhoods Unit' by Jon Bright and Geraldine Petterson, published by NACRO (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders), 1984.

