Knowledge: Collective efficacy explained in a nutshell

Collective efficacy is the willingness of neighbours to intervene for the common good. By getting personally involved, people can reduce crime in their community. The evidence shows that informal actions can be as important for crime prevention as formal policing.

The term was coined by Robert Sampson in the 1990s in a study of hundreds of neighbourhoods in Chicago. After surveying thousands of residents, Sampson found that violence was less likely in those communities with high 'social cohesion', by which he meant the togetherness or connectedness of a place. For example, are residents in a community trusting of one another or is there a deep level of cynicism and distrust?"

The greater the social cohesion, the greater the collective efficacy. Put simply, people are more likely to watch a neighbour's back if they think that neighbour will do the same for them.

There may even be an inverse relationship between collective efficacy in public and violent behaviour in private. In 2002, another study in Chicago found that more collective efficacy meant less domestic violence against women.

How do people demonstrate their willingness to get involved? In his original survey Sampson asked residents how likely they thought their neighbours were to take action to stop: truancy, loitering, graffiti, fighting, children showing disrespect to an adult, and budget cuts to the local fire station.

One thing that affects social cohesion and in turn collective efficacy is the number of people moving in to and out of a community. When the turnover is high, they are less likely to bond and hence be willing to stick their necks out for each other. There's also a big question about how much self-confidence and ability people have to do things for themselves. Efforts to improve the skills people have and to show them the things they're already doing for their communities, and building on those are crucial to helping individuals realise their potential.

Think about how much collective efficacy there is in your local area. What factors like transience might affect how much people have staked in their neighbourhoods? And what can you, as a councillor or officer, do to help people feel able to chip in?