

FEATURE

Getting best from the west

AIDAN JONES reports on an ambitious Fulham website that is trying to break barriers and bring communities in west London closer together

LOVING thy neighbour can be hard in the big, bad city, where the sanctity of privacy, frequency of population movements and countless grim tales of crime conspire to keep the people next door at a comfortable distance.

But that may be about to change as a Fulham-based website widens its reach into west London's communities.

Streetbank, the brainchild of Sam Stephens, of Peterborough Road, allows members to offer goods and skills to other people in their community for free.

In return, they can also draw on the website's 'bank', allowing those who need the occasional use of a ladder, a babysitter or free French lessons, for example, to dip into the account.

Behind the

practical advantage of borrowing and the rewards of helping someone out, Mr Stephens's deeper aim is to recreate the convivial atmosphere he enjoyed while growing up in rural England.

Mr Stephens, 32, a headhunter for charities, came up with the idea after cycling past his neighbour, who was cutting his hedge.

He said: "I needed hedge trimmers to do mine, but I only use them once or twice a year, so didn't see the point of buying them. But I didn't quite have the courage to ask if I could

borrow them," he said.

"I thought, 'there should be a website that helps you do that'."

Streetbank has so far got 600 members, the majority from across west London, linking previously unfamiliar neighbours together and strengthening community bonds.

He said: "You can live pretty independently in London, but that brings a level of isolation from

neighbours and, ultimately, the whole city.

"If you choose to be more interdependent and co-operative in both a material and community sense, community spirit develops from there."

His own experience of Streetbank started when a neighbour asked to borrow a pair of dining chairs.

He said: "A while later, I asked him for a pint of milk and it snowballed from there."

"He lent me a laptop, we became good friends and

finally we decided to knock down the garden wall to enjoy a bigger space."

If successful, the first one may ask for a small membership fee to cover running costs, but while it's in its infancy, Mr Stephens hopes free access will encourage more people to join.

As utopian as it may sound, other websites such as Gumtree and Freecycle operate on similar principles, prompting Mr Stephens to believe that localising interaction to specific roads and postcodes will foster trust between people.

He added: "There will, of course, be that person who borrows a DVD but doesn't return it."

"The scheme takes a level of decency and trust to work."

"But community is messy and takes effort and you could be disappointed by it, but the upside is that it makes you so much richer."

Want to find out more about Streetbank? Visit www.streetbank.com.



NEW AGE: (From left) Streetbank's Rosie Gable, Nick Johnson and Sam Stephens. Photo by Steve Delaney/LOOKA/ISTOCKPHOTO



CASE STUDY: Becky Shipman, 27, of North End Road, West Kensington

"STREETBANK is a good, fast source to pick up things you want or get rid of things you don't want."

"There's all sorts of things on the site - unwanted toys, cushions, DVDs, beds and sofas."

"The idea is to keep it local, and when you give something away, you get that warm feeling of helping someone."

HELPING HAND: Becky Shipman, 27, has been given a free scanner and printer by Streetbank, right. Photo by Matt Brown/ISTOCKPHOTO

"And not just anyone, but your immediate neighbours."

"Last Christmas I gave away an old push scooter that I had no use for, but it's great to know that someone else is enjoying it."

"I have been given a printer, scanner and fax machine through Streetbank, which saved me a few hundred quid."

"You get to know your neighbours through it and build up trust and community spirit, which is not always normal in London."



Photo by Steve Delaney/LOOKA/ISTOCKPHOTO