

COVER STORY

Love thy neighbour?

It isn't easy being friends with the people next door, discovers **Kate Robertson.**

JANET SPENCER has seen how poor neighbourhood relations can spiral out of control.

"It's a serious issue," says Ms Spencer, of Buyer Solutions. "I've had people come into my office and they are so desperate that they have moved out of home and they and their two children are living at a friend's place because the situation is so bad.

"They felt sufficiently threatened from verbal abuse and all sorts of other things to sell their home."

Given its ability to affect people's quality of life, she says she is often surprised at how little attention people pay to neighbourhood issues when looking to buy a house to live in. "You would be amazed at the number of people who buy at auction when it's the first time they have seen the house. You need to familiarise yourself with the property at different times and make sure there are no issues for you, not only on the sale day.

"Knock on the neighbour's door and have a natter. If you are going to live there, it's nice to introduce yourself. You can ask, 'How long have you lived there? Is it a happy area? How is the local kinder?'. There's always a legitimate reason to have a chat."

It's a lesson that Rosi Tovey has taken to heart. Ms Tovey was not overly concerned when fellow animal lovers moved into her flats in St Kilda until what became known as "the cat wars" began, with the new cats ganging



The disputes on Wisteria Lane in *Desperate Housewives* aren't uncommon in real life.

up on the original pussies.

"There were two cats. One was a particularly aggressive male and he wouldn't let any of the other cats be seen anywhere. He would come up and attack them even to the point of going into their house and beating up cats in their own living room," Ms Tovey says.

Several times, one of her neighbours was woken in the early hours of the morning by the cats fighting her ageing pets at the foot of her bed.

Ms Tovey says the new tenants were not open to talking about solutions, so the council stepped in to fit the cats with microchips, ensuring that individual cat flaps only opened for the resident cat. Although the innovative move prevented any more fights on home turf, the original cats were still too scared to leave home and the tenants were forced to keep their doors and windows permanently closed to prevent the rogue cats from entering.

"It became quite a big issue because it affected four of the eight flats there," Ms Tovey says. "They (the newcomers) had that attitude 'this is our home and we can do what we want, bugger anyone else'."

Sharing communal spaces with growing ill feeling became uncomfortable and as a result, when she was looking to buy a new house in Elwood last year, Ms Tovey made sure she met her prospective new neighbour.

"You can get some sort of feel as to whether they are nice people and feel the neighbourhood is a community," Ms Tovey says.

Port Phillip is Victoria's most densely populated municipality. Its mayor, Cr Janet Bolitho, says close living can lead to stress with complaints ranging from overly amorous lovers keeping the neighbours up, to the smell from houses where people "collect" rubbish and the noise of barking dogs.

Cr Bolitho says mutual respect is essential to negotiating successful solutions to neighbourhood disputes and that before taking steps to escalate a dispute, it's important those involved think about the possible repercussions in the years to come.

"You have both made a significant investment in your home and you will be living there for a long time. Do you really want to have unpleasantness?" she says.

The Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria estimates 270,000 Victorians experience problems with their neighbours every year. Last year, the centre officially received 15,757 complaints, with almost half relating to disputes over fences, including the position of the boundary and the need to replace a fence, its cost, height and the presence of a trellis. Complaints about trees,