

REPORT TO ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

HAPPY TO CHAT BENCHES



Report Reference EN-20-02
Meeting Date 30th November 2020
Agenda Item 8
Prepared by Town Clerk

1.0 BACKGROUND

Loneliness is regarded as one of the most significant health concerns and has been demonstrated to be as detrimental to health as smoking and worse than obesity¹ and nationally loneliness is an increasing problem for older people with half a million older people going over five days without seeing or speaking to anyone² and 40% of older people saying the television is their main company³. Whilst higher percentages of older women report loneliness compared to men, a greater number of older men report more severe levels of social isolation⁴.

Across the country, communities have created 'happy to chat' benches as one means of tackling loneliness. Benches are fitted with a plaque that denotes it as a 'happy to chat' bench where the presumption is that if someone is sat there they would welcome strangers stopping by to say hello and engage in conversation.

The benches provide an avenue for those would value additional social contact to subtly ask for help; they have been used adults of all ages and in various stages of life.

2.0 INTERPRETATION BOARD

It is recognised that many people would not welcome uninitiated conversation when resting on a bench and as such it would not be appropriate to label every bench as a 'happy to chat' bench or to convert ordinary benches to 'happy to chat' benches where it could deter users.

It is suggested that up to nine 'happy to chat' benches could be created in the town centre:

- Outside Ash Court, King Edward Road (one of two)
- Wallwood (one of six)
- Paradise Green, Bexton Road (one of two)
- Booths Garden (two of five)
- St John's Church (one of three)
- Courthouse Garden (one of five)
- Library Garden (one of six)
- The Heath (one of four)

¹ Holt-Lunstad et al (2010) - Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review

² Age UK (2016) - No-one should have no one

³ Age UK (2014) - Evidence Review: Loneliness in Later Life

⁴ Beach and Bamford (2014) – Isolation: the emerging crisis for men

Benches would be fitted with a recognisable plaque designating them as 'happy to chat' benches. These would be approx. 200mm x 80mm colour dibond plaques. The majority of similar plaques state "Happy to Chat Bench – sit here if you don't mind someone stopping to say hello".

The cost for the plaques would be £85. A minimum order value applies, making the cost the same for fewer benches and allowing the council to order additional plaques for future replacements / addition of benches to the scheme.

Local publicity would highlight their introduction and promote their use both for those looking for additional social contact and those willing to offer it.

3.0 DECISION REQUIRED

The committee should consider the introduction of 'happy to chat' benches as outlined.