



MEETING PAPER

Subject: Item 75 Happy to Chat benches
Meeting: Parks and Open Spaces Sub-Committee
Date: 15 October 2024

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~/NON-CONFIDENTIAL

Background

The concept of the 'Happy to Chat' bench is to combat loneliness and social isolation. These have already been rolled out in public locations at several sites across the country, and feature a simple sign with a message along the lines of 'sit here if you don't mind someone stopping to say hello'.

Some people may go days or weeks without the simplest of human contact, and with spontaneous social interactions becoming rarer, there are more people living in social isolation. The aim of Happy to Chat benches are to help break down this social barrier.

The benefits of outdoor seating in general have been proven; enabling people to spend longer outdoors, benefitting mental wellbeing and helping to connect people within communities, particularly for those who find indoor social venues like cafes too expensive or too busy.

Detail

A Happy to Chat bench has already been installed in Kensington Gardens. Whilst it is difficult to measure the success of these benches in achieving their intended purpose, the bench contributes to the public seating offering in the park and remains available to anyone seeking social interaction.

The Parks and Open Spaces Sub-Committee is actively considering whether to roll out Happy to Chat benches across more of its parks and open spaces, and has asked the Senior Committee and Project Clerk to put forward some ideas on potential locations and use of existing benches.

In suggesting the locations below, the Senior Committee and Project Clerk has looked at where there is a requirement for additional seating, or existing seating in appropriate locations which could be used for this purpose.

- **Belle Vue Park** – Having had new seating installed relatively recently, it should not be an issue to have a plaque made for one of them to identify it as a Happy to Chat bench. Alternatively, if the Sub-Committee would prefer to trial the idea before committing to installing a plaque on one of the benches, it may be possible to install a standalone sign behind the benches along the wall bordering the A47 (for example) to identify them as ‘Happy to Chat’ benches and briefly explain what this means.
- **Clarks Lane** – Additional seating in Clarks Lane would complement the new, fully inclusive play area which we are looking to develop there. Once the play area is completed, the Senior Committee and Project Clerk intends to put forward a proposal for a sensory garden/quiet reflective space, which would include seating. This could be shaped seating to naturally encourage social interaction and could again include a plaque to identify it as a ‘Happy to Chat’ bench.
- **Fen Park** – Additional seating could be beneficial here, particularly overlooking the pond.
- **Normanston Park** – Additional seating could be beneficial here, particularly at the tennis courts end of the park.
- **Triangle Market** – The Sub-Committee has already been discussing ideas to improve the area beneath the Sails and seating was included in this. Shaped seating was suggested to naturally encourage social interaction, and it could also be identified as ‘Happy to Chat’ seating with a plaque or particular design/colour.

Design

East Suffolk Council’s Communities Team suggested ‘Happy to Chat’ benches could be made more recognisable in their colour and/or design. If an existing bench were to be used it should not be a problem to paint it a different colour, but in the case of Belle Vue Park, for example, if one of the benches in the row of existing benches were to be painted a different colour this may look odd, so the Sub-Committee would need to consider the context of the bench when deciding on design or colour. Some suggestions for cheerful and welcoming designs are as follows:





Bespoke designs could also be considered if there is a particular design or theme the Sub-Committee would like to see. Where shaped seating has been referenced in the document above, an example of this would be as follows:



Incorporating planters into this type of seating would also provide an opportunity for sensory planting.