

Meeting	Community Development Committee
Date	27 th July 2022
Report Title	Happy to Chat Benches
Agenda Reference	8
Author	Caroline Hunt, Community Development Officer

Recommendation

1. To consider the consultation responses from local residents and discuss next steps for the Happy to Chat Benches.

Background

The Happy to Chat benches were installed as a trial on the Hamble Road/ Thames Avenue footpath in November 2021.

The aim was to help break down the barriers of social isolation and get people talking. The benefits of 'Happy to Chat' benches have been demonstrated by other similar initiatives across the country, and studies have found that providing benches allows people to spend longer outside, which is beneficial for mental health and helps to connect people within communities. This connection is particularly important for people who might find social venues like cafes too expensive or too busy.

However, these benches were removed on 30th June 2022 due to numerous reports of anti-social behaviour during the evening hours and this. The Council's decision to remove the benches was not an easy one and its priority was to give those residents directly affected by the behaviour priority, whilst they are in their homes.

Consultation

A consultation has been conducted with residents asking for feedback on two potential new locations for the benches. Posters were attached to streetlights near to where the benches were located, and letters were hand delivered to 16 residents in houses in Hamble Road, Frome Road, and Avonmead providing a link to the online survey, along with the office telephone number and the Community Development Officer's email address.

Residents were given a choice of two potential locations for the benches, shown on the image below. The reasons these locations have been chosen is that they are near streetlights, near the footpath, and less visible from neighbouring properties.



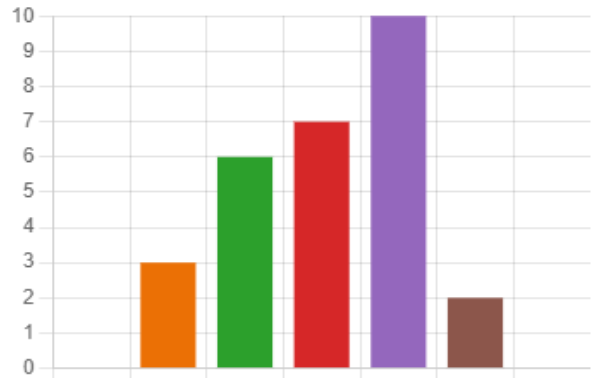


The consultation opened on Monday 18th July 2022 and closed at 5pm on Friday 29th July 2022. A total of 38 responses broken down as follows: 29 responses were submitted through Microsoft Forms, three responses were received by email, four responses by telephone, one verbally on site and one was delivered at Full Council on 26th August 2022.

1. What is your age group?

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)



Postcode distribution

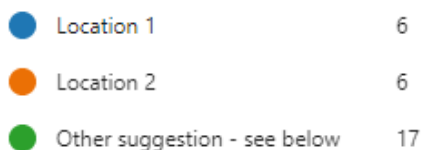
Postcode	Address	No. of responses
SN25 3PQ	Frome Road	13
SN25 3PF	Hamble Road	4
SN25 3PH	Avonmead	3
SN25 1QP	Furlong Close	2
SN25 1QQ	Thames Avenue	2
SN25 3BS	Windrush Road	2
SN25 1JD	Blunsdon Road	1
SN25 1RA	Helmsdale	1
SN25 3PL	Avonmead	1

*Note: SN25 1QQ is the office postcode; these were test responses and have not been included

4. Please choose your preferred location from the options below

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Other comments submitted via the survey

- Because it is closer to the road and footpath
- Nearer the top close to the road, and we'll lit. If it's down the middle we will still get condoms, drugs, and weed smokers.
- So the area can be patrolled easily from the road
- The area in which the Parish Council intend to put these benches is wholly inappropriate as the Hamble Road/Thames Avenue footpath is what it says, a footpath, a walk-through area only. The Council representative I spoke with said she had had positive feedback from people who would enjoy sitting and watching their dogs and children at play. My wife and I have lived at 4, Frome Road for 22 years and hardly ever heard children at play, there are far better places nearby, parks and play areas. What it will do of course is encourage those who pass down this footpath from the Shield and Dagger Pub and are drunk or noisy to take a rest and continue their shouting and hollering later into the night. It will also act as a magnet for teenagers with nothing to do and possibly even drug dealing. For me, it said it all, when Kate at the Parish Council said, 'We are moving the benches closer to the road, so they are under street lights and it will be easier for the police to get to those anti-social elements'. So in effect the staff member was admitting anti-social behaviour is likely to occur, but will be easier to contain! Which is why I understand you are moving these benches in the first place. Anti-Social behaviour, is very low down in the list of Police priorities as you know and at most the people involved will only be told to move on and will no doubt come back the following evening. We hear of people being very badly hurt and even killed over anti-social behaviour on an almost daily basis. However well-meaning the Parish Council are, the only way to avoid anti-social behaviour is not to encourage it into your area in the first place. There are a number of retired and elderly people backing onto this pathway, their lives will be made a misery. These benches should be in a suitable park. I hope you understand and agree a park or play area would be a far more suitable resting place for these benches, where they can also be enjoyed by many more people.
- I do not feel that these benches will be used for the purpose they are intended, therefore there is no suitable location.
- No location
- Benches not required in any location as they are a magnet for anti-social behaviour.
- No benches at all. As I know from past experience they are a magnet for trouble. I have severe heart problems and can't cope with more worry
- No benches. I want to finish my days in peace, not scared to sleep at night.
- I object strongly to these locations , they will be moved 130-170 yards away from the area they were in before, and they will be closer to our bungalows, many of us have our bedrooms facing out on to that path, at night we get noise as people make their way home from the pub, which we have accepted but to give them a place to sit could mean that we will have the noise for a longer period, We have seen drugs being passed out from where the seats were before and a group of youth in hoodies turn up and congregate in the evening , My suggestion for the seats would be in the park behind the garage in Thames Avenue, where parents can watch their children play . As for your comments about the seats being used for children to sit on when playing at the back of our houses, we have never seen children play there because people don't pick up behind their dogs and the grass being left longer means there is more chance of stepping in something nasty, it's a foot path, not a park. We all know that the police are very busy and will not want to keep being called out to a disturbance when we get them. There is already a problem with the seat behind Hamble Road houses, the people there are suffering constant anti-social behaviour, one couple are at their whits end because of it, We don't want the same to happen to us. Please reconsider this plan as it is unacceptable, especially as the majority of us are retired and don't need this to worry about.
- Anywhere away from residential houses as they will be used for meeting points for anti-social behaviour to occur.



- Due to the reasons stated for the removal of the benches in the first place, anywhere away from residential areas!
- The park behind the garage and pub in Thames Avenue
- The park behind Thames Avenue between the football pitches for parents to sit and watch, or the grassed area at the top of Thames avenue hill, about level with the speed ramps, making a seat for people to rest on their way up the hill, and clearly visible to passing traffic
- Nowhere near an already problem of antisocial behaviour which is 150 yards away to become another problem further along the path. Put them in a park not a pathway!
- I don't think it is appropriate to pass the problem to another area. This new suggested location is no better and will attract the wrong sort of behaviour again. It won't be monitored and you will have the same issue but just other residents to have to deal with anti-social issues near their homes. Perhaps there should have been a consultation before you wasted time and money on these in the first place. Nice idea but not thought through. It would be good if you could monitor the dog faeces issue in the area before you worry about benches. Perhaps a luncheon club should be offered if there isn't one already to combat loneliness.
- These locations are along the same thoroughfare which means moving the problem along the path
- More suitable location would be in a dedicated park or play area rather than a thoroughfare
- We do not require the benches because they were attracting undesirable people
- I don't want them at the bottom of my garden due to anti-social behaviour

6. Did you use the benches before they were removed?

[More Details](#)

● Yes	9
● No	20



7. If you answered yes, which of the options below best describes how you used them?

[More Details](#)

● Resting whilst out dog walking	5
● A place to meet friends	1
● Taking a break whilst walking ba...	1
● Keeping an eye on my children ...	2
● Other	0



8. Do you have any other comments?

- Maybe we could have a poster with some interesting conversation topics
- I believe 2 is the best option as it backs on to the least amount of properties and is more visible from the road for police to monitor
- Bring them back
- Please bring back our benches ASAP a lot of old people rest on them while walking their dogs.



- I fear they will be used for anti-social behaviour in the evenings and night, this is very worrying and frightening for myself as a resident that backs onto the intended footpath.
- Don't want them
- Unfortunately they are not needed as they're not used for their intended purposes.
- Please listen to the people that elect YOU. NO benches
- No benches please!!!
- Please bring the benches back, used them every day when out with the dog, just to rest for a while, and a lot of people used them most elderly to chat and meet people.
- As a dog walker, having 2 dogs, we enjoy our walks along that stretch & allow the dogs off their leads, When the benches which have now been taken away were there, there was rubbish & other used condoms etc, I was unable to let my dogs off their leads as was scared as to what they would pick up or touch, ie used drug paraphernalia. I have walked past there in the late evening with my dogs when there was groups of I presume lads with either hoodies or balaclavas, making me feel anxious & unnerved. I don't see how you think moving the benches 100 yards along the same stretch would stop this. I would even cause more issues as directly out the back of our home.
- The two proposed new locations both back on to my family home, I feel these benches being out there will have a massive detrimental effect on our lives. After discussions with the people whose homes were affected by these benches being there, this is something I do not want to be experiencing in the future. I don't understand how anyone with a brain cell in their head would think that moving them 100 yards along the pathway would make the slightest bit of difference to the type of clientele they attract. This is just going to continue & means I & my family will be scared to use our own back gate for fear of what may have been left there, syringes etc & other drug related items. Plus the extra noise at night which will be heard loudly from our bedroom windows which we like to keep open. The whole situation will make our lives a nightmare & fear from reprisals will mean we will feel we can't approach them or ask them to move on or keep the noise down! I understand that the council were trying to do a good thing with putting these benches there for the residents but it's only going to cause more trouble again in the long run. My own son was walking from our house in Avonmead to the shield & dagger in broad daylight recently, he is 28 years old. And he was approached by one of these lovely humans on a bike demanding he gave him his trainers & when he said no, demanded money from him. Now my son can hold his own & told him to do one, but just imagine if this was one of the elderly people your keep mentioning who want to keep the benches. It has already been proved that they are used for this anti-social behaviour so why does the council think it's going to make any difference. It will be exactly the same outcome just further down the path & I & many others don't want this in our area or furthermore right out the back of our homes.
- Your plan to move the seats 130-170 yards from the previous location due to anti-social behaviour only moves the problem closer to our houses. Our bedrooms back onto the path, and at night when people go home from the pub, we would prefer for them to keep moving, not to sit and make more noise, we have witnessed drugs being passed about by youths on bikes with hoodies pulled up across their faces when the seats were in the previous place, we don't wish that to be happening close to our gardens. Please think again about this plan
- For the short time the seats were there we witnessed more noise. In the past we had bottles thrown over our fence, breaking the windows in our conservatory, we have since put an extension in its place and a flat roof to make it less visible from the path. We do experience noise from those passing by on the way from the pub and are worried that if seats are there it could encourage them to sit and make more noise. As for the remarks about watching children play we have lived here for 15 years and never seen children play there, mainly because it's full of dog poo and the grass recently has been left to grow longer and when we pick up after our dogs, we have to be careful where we walk. In my opinion it's a footpath, bit a park



- I witnessed gangs of teenagers riding their bikes along the footpath where I was walking my dogs, they were riding quite fast towards me and expected me to move out the way for them, to which I didn't so they rode past me too close to me and my dog they were laughing and being intimidating as they passed me, they all had hoodies up and some with black masks over their faces. Others came from another direction and all met up at the benches they were dealing stuff between themselves whilst at the benches too I carried on walk-in away from them with my dogs and within a few minutes a couple of them came from behind me riding fast again and got close to me again and made one of my dogs react nervously as they passed. This has happened a few times now and is intimidating when all I want to do is walk my dogs

Additional comments received

Postcode	Response Format	Comments	1	2	Other suggestions
SN25 3PQ	Email	Please please don't let them go anywhere near us... They can go up right under a light & near the road. That will deter any drug use... The benches were down there before & we found used condoms & straws to sniff stuff...			Also been in my garden & smelled weeds from over the fence. people with balaclavas & masks on to hide their identity. No idea why it would be any different up the other end.
Not given	Telephone	I don't want the happy to chat benches in location 1 or 2 due to people leaving the pub & making noise			I suggest that they are placed somewhere where there are no benches in the area, such as near Haydon leigh school.
SN25 3PQ	Email Via Councillor Renard	I have had a long conversation with Mr Webb who has followed up with the email below on the subject of these benches. Over many years, I have had to get benches removed from around the Ward as they attracted vandalism & anti-social behaviour so a great deal of thought needs to be put in before we put some back and create problems for the future. I appreciate that older people in particular appreciate a place to stop so benches may be appropriate in certain areas but this is not a suitable location in my opinion.			I ask the Parish Council to rethink this proposal as I do not believe this will deliver good outcomes for the residents we serve. I would just like you to know that I do not agree with moving the benches as the anti social behaviour will just move with it & we will get no response from the police when problems arrive.
Not given	Telephone	Resident thought staff should have knocked on doors to discuss with residents. He said the two options were a joke, as he felt it's just the same path. Having benches there is encouraging the people leaving the pub that are noisy to be able to sit and stay for longer, whereas at			Resident said we should give the benches to a charity or put them at the bus stops.



		least If they are noisy they are walking past & not lingering.			
SN25 3PQ	Telephone	Resident at 10 Frome Road, was very happy to know that the benches will be returned & her first choice would be option 2, but she doesn't mind either.		X	She is thrilled that they are going back.
SN25 3PH	Telephone	The benches were a problem in the original location, by moving the benches you will be moving the problem. People walking from the pub disturb us by using the benches.			I don't want the benches at all
Not given	Email	After following all the dialogue on the happy to chat bench sites, I think it would be prudent to withdraw this scheme from the positions you have indicated, unfortunately in this present time youths/some youths have an agenda which is antisocial and problematic to people.			It's a good idea but if you picked a cross section of people from the parish to choose a site I guarantee it would not be near to where they live!
SN25 3PH	Attending Full Council	Don't want the benches to be installed along the path at all. When the benches were in situ we experienced anti-social behaviour and theft from our gardens.			
Not given	Verbally to the POST Manager whilst on site	I'm looking forward to the benches being installed, I used them whilst dog walking		X	