

# 'The Bircham Centre Backs Bench Project'

by staff reporter  
5th June 2023

**The Bircham Centre in Reepham is the first benefactor of two benches donated by a new mental health awareness project, The Bench UK.**

The Benches are part of a new Norfolk-based community psychology initiative which encourages people to re-engage and have healthy conversations with friends and family to promote positive mental health after the social isolation periods of Covid-19.

Andy Watts, 48, launched 'The Bench UK' project to coincide with Mental Health Awareness Month in May 2023.

"Communities have not yet recovered from the impact of Covid 19, and we see the emotional and social scars in our community members," said Mr Watts. He believes that the mental health crisis needs addressing by encouraging communities to come together and support one another.

According to the Office of National Statistics; In England, 1 in 5 adults experienced some form of depression in early 2021, more than double that observed before the Covid-19 pandemic. 5,219 suicides were registered in 2021. This is 307 more than in 2020.

Mr Watts said; "These figures are alarming, but it doesn't portray the whole picture.

Covid-19 has had such a dramatic effect on people's lives, not just socially, but also at home and in the workplace.'

"In my opinion the emotional scars that it's left are deeper than expected. We must address this now, otherwise more people will could die from suicide."

"We acknowledge the Government's Mental Health Action plan in-which £500 million will be spent on improving mental health provisions, but the first crucial step is to encourage people to talk."

Mr Watts admits his mental health was impacted by the Lockdown periods. He recalls feeling trapped and disconnected from the world. It wasn't until he had social interaction again that he started feeling healthier and more positive.

Three years on from the first Lockdown, Mr Watts, who works as an Accident and Emergency medic in Lincolnshire, says many people are still finding struggling with re-engaging socially to 'break the silence' of Lockdown.

"I treat people on a daily basis for medical issues that are primarily unrelated to mental health. But there is a common theme; many people, especially men are admitting to feeling lonely.

This is a major concern as loneliness is a major contributing factor in suicide."

Stuart Smith features in Episode 1 of the YouTube videos that The Bench UK are producing and releasing on their website. It is hoped that by sharing other people's stories, others will be inspired to reach out and engage in conversation.

He reflects on the social isolation he experienced when he started working from home. It had a big effect on his mental health.

“I’d always worked in a busy office where we all interacted with each other during the day. When this was removed, it was an odd feeling. At first I thought being at home was fun, but as time went by, I felt myself withdrawing from people and my family.’

“Eventually I went to see my GP, who diagnosed me with clinical depression and issued me with medication.”

Mr Smith admitted that the isolation from his friends and brother played a big part in his depression.

“Not being able to see my friends or brother, was dreadful, I didn’t have an outlet to talk and make sense of things.

“I’m now one of those guys that calls people for a chat and makes plans to see people.

Sharing my story with Andy and The Bench UK, felt like a really positive thing for me and has definitely made me appreciate my mates more.”

Dr.Cheontell Barnes is a Clinical Psychologist at Norfolk Therapy Room an independent therapy provision for children and adults.

Dr. Barnes has been supporting The Bench UK to help them understand mental health so they can deliver the project safely and objectively.

Dr Barnes said, “Community projects such as ‘The Bench UK’ are crucial to support people, young and old, to start open and healthy conversations about their emotional wellbeing and mental health. As social beings, connecting together helps us to normalise our experiences and recognise we are not alone in our emotional suffering....nobody should feel alone, we all have mental health. The Covid 19 pandemic, continuing austerity and the cost of living crisis, and cuts to public sector services have changed the landscape of the social care and mental health services offer and accessibility. One of the ways we can improve mental health is to encourage communities to increase opportunities for creating social connection. It’s fantastic to support a project like this in Norfolk where we have some of the highest rates of mental health referrals for young people nationally.”

Dr Ian Kenvyn has over 30 years working in Mental Health and is one of the Trustees of The Bircham Centre in Reepham. He said the centre was thrilled to be chosen as the first location for the benches.

“It truly is good to talk; sometimes all you need is to know that someone has listened to you.

Also to connect and talk is one of the reasons why we live in social groups, it’s ironic that so much of modern life is about being isolated even in a crowd. Talking and being heard has the potential for social good.”

The Bench UK aims to embed 100 benches around the United Kingdom as a symbol to encourage people to re-engage with others and have healthy conversations.

These benches are also designed to have a positive impact on the community, as most of them will be restored by community workshops, creative groups and individuals.

Nick Spencer, is a retired Police Officer. He heard about The Bench UK project and offered to help. He and his partner Debs, restored the first two benches. Mr Spencer said;

“My life is vastly different to when I was serving as a Police Officer. I was constantly meeting people and dealing with the public.

“So I take any chance to be involved with a community project. Although I have to admit, I did get some extra help to restore the benches, but it was a rewarding focus for Debs and I.”

Mr Watts concluded; "We have a long way to go to reach our goal of 100 benches and 1000 videos, but our project is as much about the journey.

"We have met so many amazing people, some have already benefited from our project. The more funds we raise, the more people we can reach out to."

If you would like to share your story about how your mental health was impacted by Covid-19, The Bench UK would like to hear from you.

Details on how to make donations and full details of The Bench UK can be found on their website; [www.thebenchuk.co.uk](http://www.thebenchuk.co.uk)