

Sit down next to me ... promenade benches aim to battle loneliness



**FANCY A CHAT?
THEN COME ALONG
AND TAKE A SEAT ...**

Carl Lecky, Wirral's Town Crier, with his wife, Rose, and Wirral's deputy mayor, Cllr George Davies, and Wirral residents, on one of the benches

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SPECIAL benches have been installed along New Brighton's promenade in a bid to encourage visitors to sit down and talk to each other.

The "Happy to Chat" benches feature a little sign which reads "Sit here if you don't mind someone stopping to say hello".

For people who feel isolated in their daily lives, the benches are an opportunity to meet somebody new.

Wirral is thought to be one of the UK's loneliest regions, with more than 35% of the population saying they feel lonely once a week.

That figure is 64% for people over the age of 60.

The ECHO went down to see the new benches, which line the seafront's Ian Fraser Walk.

Harriet Wilson, a 68-year-old retiree, was sitting enjoying the warm weather.

She said: "I used to walk along the prom with my daughter many years ago when she was a little girl. My husband and I taught her how to ride her first bike along with The Dips, and we spent many sum-



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Harriet Wilson

mers here. Now my daughter lives abroad, my husband has passed away, and although I know I can pick up the phone and talk to her, I don't know how to Face-time.

"I don't know how to text. I don't have any family or friends around here.

She continued: "Sitting here lets me get all my worries off my chest and makes me realise that I am not alone."

Another visitor who stopped to chat was a young man who wished to remain anonymous.

He told us the benches were already helping him to cope with a challenging year.

He said: "I lost my mum to cancer this year, and my grandparents passed away before Christmas. Opening up has always been tough for me, but the past few months have made this worse.

"There's a lot of pressure to adopt a persona in public, no matter how old you are. I am already talking to doctors and councillors, but because I am so focused on recovering mentally, I feel like I have set no time for making friends.

"Sitting here over these past couple days - even for a few minutes - has given me the incentive I needed to meet new people and recover."

The benches are the work of the Wirral Older People's Parliament, which has run a recycled bench project in New Brighton alongside Mosslands School since 2013.

There are now over 200 benches lining the seafront, allowing passers-by to sit back and soak in some of Wirral's best views.

It is hoped a further three Happy to Chat benches will be installed soon.

NEWS WIRE

Fire crews fight blaze overnight

FIRE crews were yesterday still at the scene of a large fire on an industrial estate in Kirkby.

A blaze on Wednesday tore through a wood pallet business on Knowsley Industrial Park, sending huge flames into the sky. Crews managed to stop the fire spreading to neighbouring businesses and reduced the smoke plume to around 60ft by teatime.

Shocking footage taken at the scene off Charleywood Road showed huge flames flying into the sky as firefighters worked to contain it.

Yesterday morning, the fire service said that one engine was still at the scene, with crews checking temperatures at the scene.

Witnesses described an "unbearable heat" coming from the blaze.

One told the ECHO: "There are massive flames all over the place. The heat is unbearable. I have been at the scene for five or ten minutes and I am sweating from the heat of it."

A spokesman for the fire service said: "Crews remained on scene on Charleywood Road, Kirkby, overnight.

"The incident was scaled down to two engines at around 2.30am, with firefighting operations ceasing shortly before 5am.

"One fire engine remains in attendance at the scene this morning, with crews continuing to carry out hot-spotting and temperature monitoring of the areas affected by fire.

"An investigation into the cause of the fire will be carried out in due course."

Lifeboat in river drama

A PERSON was pulled from the Mersey by Wirral's Coastguard Rescue Team.

The team was alerted to a person in the river, near to Woodside Ferry Terminal, just after midday yesterday.

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service's boat Marine Fire One and New Brighton Lifeboat were both launched.

Marine Fire One rescued the person from the water and returned to Liverpool's Pier Head, where an ambulance was waiting.

The casualty was transported to hospital.