

# TheHildreds Banter Bench 2019



**T.E.D.**

Ageing Better  
in East Lindsey



## It's good to talk

With advancing age, people may experience loneliness and can become socially isolated for a number of reasons such as leaving the workplace, a lack of family ties, the deaths of spouses and friends, or through declining health, disability and/or illness.

According to Age UK, 3.6 million older people now live alone in the UK, of which two million people are aged 75 or older. 1.9 million older people often feel ignored or invisible and loneliness has been recorded as being as harmful to a person's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad, 2010). Despite this there still remains a stigma surrounding loneliness and people often find it difficult to reach out, particularly older people. Talk, Eat, Drink (TED) Ageing Better East Lindsey, therefore seeks to raise awareness and change the way people think about, acknowledge and combat loneliness. An effective way to do so is by taking the time to talk. In this report we highlight one way that this can be done effectively through what we have called 'The Banter Bench'.



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## About TED

Talk Eat Drink (TED) Ageing Better in East Lindsey is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better aims to develop creative ways for people aged over 50 to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. It is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

## Case Study: 'The Banter Bench' – Hildreds Shopping Centre, Skegness

The Hildreds Shopping Centre in Skegness opened its doors to the public in 1988 and since then has been welcoming over 4 million visitors every year to its 30 stores, particularly during the height of the summer season where visitors from outside of the area flock to Skegness for their summer break.

Out of season Skegness becomes much quieter but the 'locals' still come out to shop and spend the day in the town. During these quieter months, Hildreds centre staff come to recognise regular visitors, especially those on their own. Staff therefore make a special note to say hello and where possible spend a little time with those who have affectionately become to be known as the 'regulars'. Staff reported that after a while people would begin to open up, and they would find out that many had moved to the area to retire with their partner and sadly their partner has since passed away. The 'regulars' often reported feeling alone as a result of this, and that coming to the centre was a great way for them to get out and about and see others. For some this was the only personal contact they got that day or all week.



"It was so nice to have someone different just come and show an interest in me and want to talk to me"

(Local Resident)



Recognising this as a possible opportunity to develop something bigger, TED East Lindsey in partnership with Hildreds Shopping Centre embarked on a project which became known as 'The Banter Bench'. The idea of using a bench was born from centre manager Steve Andrews, who, while travelling on the tube in London one day noticed someone wearing a badge that stated "Tube Friend – Happy to Talk", identifying that person as someone who was willing to strike up a conversation with anyone while sat on the train, which is traditionally seen as a very closed and isolating environment. Steve felt that this was something the centre could engage with and TED were more than happy to help.



"We wish these sorts of things happened in our own towns/cities"

(Visitor to the area)

"It's so lovely coming here and seeing people wanting to talk to you. We often don't find that in our own shopping centre. I hope this happens more regularly"

(Visitor to the area)

Located within the centre's mall, right next to a busy café, and manned by TED's very own crack team of talkers and listeners; 'The Banter Buddies'. The bench provided an opportunity for people to simply sit down, take a load off their feet and talk to someone about absolutely anything and everything, as well as receive advice and suggestions on clubs, societies, and events being run that might be of interest to them, providing opportunities for them to socialise.

Since this initial day the banter bench has remained within the Hildreds centre and remains a success. The centre regularly paints the bench with different characters such as 'The Gruffalo', or 'Peppa Pig', as it helps attract people to the bench but also attracts children who often don't need a script or any excuse to speak, and will engage with those who are sitting on the bench already. As a result, the 'Banter Bench' has reached beyond its original remit of engaging with older people and has become a place where people of all ages can sit, engage, and interact with one another, for example, young mothers who may also be feeling lonely and isolated.

"The feedback I have received has been fantastic on all social media platforms and I honestly think that this is something that could grow and morph into something more permanent".

(Steve, Hildreds Centre Manager)

## What did we learn?

1. People enjoy talking, often about nothing in particular to begin with, which can lead to more specific topics being discussed or details about people being unearthed. For example, while talking to one lady we discovered her passion for all things Elvis and even engaged in a little sing-along with her. Additionally, one gentleman after refusing to talk to the team to start with, kept walking past and seeing others talking and laughing and in the end decided to come and have a chat himself, breaking down barriers and opening up about his experiences.
2. Working in partnerships with a local shopping centre is a key avenue for connecting with a significant number of people in a short space of time, in an environment that is safe and controlled.
3. Encouraging members of staff to engage with people is a great way to create regular custom.
4. Using a theme or characters on the bench can help engage with a wider audience and encourage young children and others to talk.
5. Older adults are often unaware of what activities or events are happening in their area, and often don't want to ask, but by engaging with them in conversation it provides a perfect opportunity from which to pass out information, give details of bus routes or journey planning or just share a cup of tea.

“When I met with [TED Team Member] to discuss volunteering, she ignited a spark in me and gave me motivation to make me feel like I wanted to ‘live’ life, something I had previously lost. This was a perfect opportunity to do this and make a difference”

(TED Banter Buddy)

## Top tips to become a ‘Banter Buddy’



Look approachable and friendly – Put your phone away, smile, and uncross your arms.



Challenge Yourself – Set yourself some weekly or monthly goals to meet and talk to a certain number of new people.



Get Out and About – Go to different places, for example, the bus or train station, the library or a coffee shop and see who you can interact with.



Start small – A simple ‘hello’ or ‘good morning’ can go a long way to breaking down barriers of communication and make big difference to people you pass.



Ask open questions – Questions that require more than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer will often invite further discussion. Try asking for advice or an opinion, commenting on the weather, or sharing a compliment.

“It is an absolute pleasure to work with Steve and his staff at the Hildreds. The interest shown in working with TED and the commitment to ensure older people are welcomed and accommodated is outstanding”

(Elaine, TED Age-friendly Business Officer)

## Concluding thoughts and future directions

Despite this day taking place in peak season, and the bench attracting more tourists than locals, it did still highlight the need for this sort of community engagement. Therefore, in response to feedback from the day and from other customers throughout the year there are now three 'Banter Benches' located in the centre, and Steve and the TED team are working together on how best to maximise their potential.

One such plan is to take further inspiration from Steve's tube encounter and produce badges that members of the shopping centre staff, or the public can wear to identify themselves as 'Banter Buddies' and someone who is willing to talk. Customers and staff can then put their badge on any time they like, showing they are willing to help or engage in conversation. By doing this it creates a way of opening up the space and lines of communication on a more frequent basis.

The Hildreds has also recently introduced some outdoor planted seating areas, which have again provided further space for families and the general public to sit, rest or talk. Again, the community has been engaged in this project, as they were the ones who planted and maintained these areas, even providing the opportunity for local people to grow and pick their own vegetables.

Finally, based on the success of these initiatives and the involvement of TED, the Hildreds Shopping centre have also looked to engage with the TED Age-friendly Business Award becoming an Age Friendly shopping centre, as well as encouraging individual stores to get involved. To date seven stores have been assessed and awarded Age-friendly Business status including: Burton, Game, Vodafone, The Chuckling Cheese Company, Boots Optician, Wilko and Max Spielman.

For more information on Age-friendly Business Award please contact the TED team on [ted@lincsymca.co.uk](mailto:ted@lincsymca.co.uk) or on 01529 301965



# About East Lindsey



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Ageing Better  
in East Lindsey

East Lindsey is a large, sparsely populated district within the county of Lincolnshire, which includes the popular coastal seaside towns of Skegness and Mablethorpe.

East Lindsey has a higher than average ageing population with 29% of people aged 65 and over. High numbers of older people move to East Lindsey in their retirement years and many have multiple chronic health conditions and few social and familial connections in the region. Public transport across East Lindsey is poor and therefore accessing services can be challenging, especially for older adults.

The overarching aims of the TED Programme are to:

- Reduce social isolation and loneliness
- Help older people to become better connected with volunteering, social, leisure and health improving activities
- Provide opportunities for older people to influence the design, delivery and evaluation of both the services and businesses available to them

We currently have 1700 registered TED members, 85 businesses across East Lindsey hold an Age-friendly Business Award, and 516 volunteers have contributed 8,156 hours to the TED programme between April 2018 and August 2019 .

## Further information...

To find out more about TED or to get involved visit our website [www.tedineastlindsey.co.uk](http://www.tedineastlindsey.co.uk) or start a conversation and share your views online: Twitter: [@ted\\_EastLindsey](https://twitter.com/ted_EastLindsey)



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