

STREET SEATS

Street Benches, Southville, Bristol

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How easy is it for older people to walk around your local area? Uneven pavements, busy traffic and a lack of facilities can make getting around by foot almost impossible. The Southville Community Development Association in Bristol decided it wanted to find out what barriers older residents faced when walking around the local area.

In 2003 the community association worked with older residents to complete a survey of local streets. The survey highlighted that for many older people going for a walk – even a short one – was difficult without stopping every now and again for a rest. **The lack of places to stop and rest was a major problem.** The community association identified a number of good sites for locating benches – close to the shops, outside the bank, near the school, in the park and outside the local church. All these locations are on routes that are well-used by pedestrians.

The community association secured £2000 from the council to pay for five benches. It consulted older residents on the type of bench they would like. They chose a metal bench with a good arm rest to help them get up from the seat.

“Since the benches have been installed they have all been really well used. Not only have they provided a really useful resting place for older people, pregnant women, and people with disabilities, they have also become well-used meeting places where all kinds of people stop for a chat. When I pass by I see people sitting on them, which is just what we want.”

Ben Barker, chair of Southville Community Development Association

There has been strong community support for the project. The church now has a bench and they have used it to commemorate one of their members. A local bank has a bench outside, and arranged to reposition it when the building’s entrance was altered.

The benefits go wider than providing a place for people to sit, rest and chat. Ben explains that, “By creating these meeting places we’ve also helped to make the streets feel safer – when people are using the benches there are more eyes on the street. It also encourages people to walk or cycle for short journeys rather than take the car.”

The community association has also installed several cycle racks. However, it hasn't always been plain sailing. Ben recalls that, "We did have a problem with one shop – we thought we'd found the perfect site but they wouldn't have it as they thought it would attract anti-social people and 'ne'er-do-wells' to loiter. It has also taken quite a while to put the benches in because we've had to get planning permission to install them as 'street furniture'. But [we carry on looking for more places to site the benches](#). We face a combination of bureaucracy, prejudice and congestion – sometimes where we want to site a bench the pavement just isn't wide enough."

Facts and Information

- Benches are not only particularly useful for the elderly, but also for pregnant women and people with disabilities.
- Some benches are works of art that give the community identity.
- The Development Trusts Association can advise on linking voluntary, private and statutory groups for mutual benefit. Call DTA at 0845 458 8336 or visit www.dta.org.uk.
- For more information about making your neighbourhood streets friendlier, visit Sustrans at www.sustrans.org.uk or Living Streets at www.livingstreets.org.uk.