

Drop-in sessions at a Church of England parish, set up to provide a "safe space" for people feeling anxious or lonely in the wake of the pandemic, have proved so popular that they are being expanded to cater for demand.

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Ric's Bench pictured with Vicar and a parishioner

"Ric's bench", offering tea, coffee, snacks and a place to chat at St Richard's parish in Haywards Heath, West Sussex, launching a fourth session in response to demand.

Father Chris Brading, Vicar of St Richard's, said the two-hourly sessions are attracting people of all faiths and none to the church and hall. "A

Volunteers are coming forward from the church and the wider community, he said. The sessions are about listening, engaging with guests and providing signposting to specialist support if needed.

The "Ric's bench" title is taken from a bench - actually a pew - preserved from the original "tin church", that was demolished to make way for the current church building in the 1930s.

The bench now sits outside the hall as a symbol of the ongoing outreach work of the church.

"We set up at the end of September but we had been praying about this through the lockdown.

"Loneliness and anxiety were clearly on the rise because of Covid.

"'Ric's bench' is somewhere you can go and sit, where you can meet friends and talk to people or just sit and reflect," Father Chris said.

As a result of its work running a dementia café twice a month, the parish has established links with GP surgeries in the town, and these are helping to spread the word about this latest initiative.

More information:

- The Church of England's [mental health resources are available online](#).

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