

On the mend: Community shed project alleviates social isolation

Debenham Shed is a community workshop project where people meet to connect, converse and create. As part of the East of England Co-op's #EastTogether campaign, **Charles Bliss** spoke to chair Bernard Rose to shed some light on the matter.



It all started with a bit of spring cleaning.

In March 2018, Les Wright and Bernard Rose were tasked with clearing out a number of local houses, but could not bring themselves to dispose of tools and equipment unearthed in the process.

"I sensed that the tools could find a new home if they were given some attention," says Bernard, chair of Debenham Shed.

After contacting likeminded individuals in the area, the Debenham Shed team was invited to use a vacated forty-foot container at Two Fields Farm on Low Road, Debenham by Jeannie and Glenn Buckingham. The container was already kitted out with electricity and lighting, providing the perfect space for a workshop. It quickly became an environment in which to build social connections and practice handiwork, but most of all to have fun.

"Debenham Shed is a place where members of the community can exchange skills by working on projects together to upcycle and repair equipment," Bernard explains. "It is a lot like the BBC's *The Repair Shop*."

"For example, if a table has not been looked after, we can plane it down, wax it, polish it and return it to full health so that this piece of furniture that belonged to grandma can still be treasured for many years to come."

Debenham Shed also collects items for Tools with a Mission in Ipswich – a Christian charity that collects and refurbishes unwanted usable tools and sends them to the developing world for livelihood creation.

"Tools with a Mission refurbishes computer equipment and hand tools – some of which go to Luzira Prison in Kampala, Uganda so that former offenders can leave prison with a trade skill and give back to their communities."

Debenham Shed is affiliated with the UK Men's Sheds Association (UKMSA), although Bernard emphasises that it is not just men who are welcome to join.

"We are open to everyone," he says. "Jeannie Buckingham has been a member from the start and another female member is a skilled leatherworker."

As part of UKMSA, the project aims to support isolated adults in communities in Suffolk, such as Framlingham, Mendlesham and



Bernard Rose (pictured) is chair of Debenham Shed, where locals can build social connections while making and mending

Stradbroke. The coronavirus pandemic has thrown a spanner in the works, though some activities can continue.

"Due to our farm location, a number of projects can take place outside and some members have been able to stay operational, but many senior members have had to isolate or shield," Bernard explains.

While members have been forced to down tools, Bernard and his team, including vice-chair Les Wright, secretary and treasurer Tony Hutt, fundraiser and quartermaster Douglas Tatem and Vince Langdon-Morris, are taking the opportunity to expand the site.

"Even before the pandemic, we realised we needed more space and planned to update the facility," Bernard says. "Our existing container was only two

metres wide, so there's no way we could socially distance safely."

Debenham Shed benefitted from a donation from the East of England Co-op's Community Cares Fund towards the extension.

"The East of England Co-op is fantastic because its philosophy is based on supporting local communities and making sure that facilities like ours remain available," Bernard explains. "They've been very generous, funding about 10pc of the entire project."

"We want to say a massive 'thank you' to local authorities, businesses and organisations like the East of England Co-op that have been amazing in helping us provide our services."

During lockdown, three more containers have been added and joined together to extend the

indoor space to approximately 1,300 sq ft. The team will launch the new and improved project in spring 2021.

In the interim, the team regularly checks in with members to tackle loneliness and isolation. "We keep in contact and offer support, giving hope and making sure there is still good cohesion within the community."

"One positive point of this pandemic is that it has motivated people to take care of others in their communities," Bernard adds. "It is wonderful to see – and long may it continue after we have the virus under control!"

For more information, contact debenhamshed@gmail.com. Watch more episodes from the #EastTogether series at www.eastofengland.coop/easttogether



Jeannie Buckingham of Two Fields Farm has been a member of Debenham Shed from the beginning



Debenham Shed is a member of the UK Men's Sheds Association

Pictures: ARCHANT