

COUNTRY LIFE: Suzie Pugh felt isolated when she moved to Highwood but starting the Catch-up Cafe changed all of that

A place to go where new friends and lots of laughter mean no one has to be lonely



FRIENDS: (l-r) Mary Mitchell, Jo Moss-Rowe and Connie Rowe



FINE FARE: Shirley Austin on one of the stalls at the monthly cafe

By Harriet Sinclair

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AS THE temperature plummets, children everywhere are dreaming of a white Christmas.

But for the county's elderly and vulnerable, the cold weather can bring loneliness and isolation, and, as the nights draw in, some can go a whole week without seeing anyone.

The Essex Community Foundation, which is running its annual Surviving Winter Appeal in conjunction with the Essex Chronicle, says tackling seclusion is vital to reduce the number of unnecessary winter deaths.

Latest government research from the Office for National Statistics reveals there were 1,010 people cold-related deaths in Essex in the past year – nearly two thirds of the 1,700 victims in the whole of the east of England, which includes Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk.

Fun

But the Catch-up Cafe in Highwood is doing everything it can to prevent that, and provide companionship and a fun meeting place at the same time.

The monthly meet-up has been running for the past three years, and December's gathering was a Christmas party complete with mulled wine, mince pies and carols sung by children from Highwood Primary School.

It's events like this that give Connie Rowe, 84, an opportunity to go



LOVELY PLACE: John and Rita Wealleans have been coming to the Catch-up Cafe since it opened

out and meet new people.

"It's nice to see a lot of different people, especially when you are indoors all day," said Connie, 84, whose daughter Jo Moss-Rowe brings her every month.

"In winter, my husband and I don't really see many people. The best part is when the kids came indoors singing; when it's just adults, you don't really notice Christmas."

The cafe also runs the yearly flu-jab clinic in October, as well as an information service every month, along with an open surgery with the parish councillor, and visits from a local police officer.



TEAM EFFORT: The organisers at the Catch-up Cafe are (l-r) Anne Mitchell MBE, Barbara Cousins, Michele Saice, Suzie Pugh and Jean Latham

"A lot of people really look forward to it, they have it in their calendar," explained organiser Suzie Pugh, 43, who got the idea for the cafe when she moved to the area and wanted to meet some new people.

"It can be very secluded round here, the winters are very harsh and if you don't drive you can be isolated," added Suzie, who also runs Love Shabby Chic, based at Writtle Road Nursery, Chelmsford.

"To be honest, when I first moved here, I found it quite lonely. Before the cafe started, it felt like a row of houses, now it feels like a community. Every time we have 30 to 40 people here, people of all ages, and when people come here once, they come again."

"The village hasn't got a shop or a post office, so there was no central meeting point and people couldn't get to know their neighbours."

Jubilee

"But after starting the cafe we had a 200-person street party here for the Jubilee. Now I feel part of the community, the team of seven of us are all neighbours and friends, we go out together."

"We also have an information service, village agent, parish councillor having a surgery out there, a police officer every month, so if anyone has any worries, there are people they can talk to. If someone is feeling vulnerable – they can come here."

The mum-of-two got six of her neighbours involved, and they run the cafe between them, with a little help from the ECF, which gave the cafe a donation to help get it off the ground, as well as some money from the Surviving Winter fund, which this year has already reached a total of £5,500 thanks to Chronicle readers.

"We have supported them before with funds from the Surviving Winter appeal and will be doing so again this year," said Jo Murphy,



WE'LL DRINK TO THAT: Back (l-r): Val Sella, Paula Closs. Front (l-r) Irene Blake, Mavis Robinson and Terry Hebblethwaite raise a cup

head of communications for the ECF.

"When you speak to most elderly people, isolation is a real killer, especially on dark days. People who have little sight or mobility can go a week without seeing anyone."

"It's about that generational thing as well, so this gives elderly

people and youngsters a chance to see each other."

And the cafe is clearly a hit; the hall packed with activity and is packed out with a variety of people, as well as stalls selling local goods.

"We have been coming every month since it started," said Rita

Wealleans, 70, who comes with her husband John, 72.

"My husband doesn't get out much due to health conditions, so Suzie has been a godsend. When you get here you meet people, it makes such a change to see a different face and it really makes a difference to us – we are so blessed."

"I have been in Highwood for 60 years and I've been coming here since it started," added Mary Mitchell, 87. "It's something I look forward to."

NO MATTER HOW MUCH IT'S ALL FOR THE CAUSE



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- For people in the 60-plus age bracket, ECF is suggesting that those who do not need their government Winter Fuel Payment could consider donating it to the Surviving Winter Appeal