

# Warm Spaces across Sheffield Methodist District

“all are welcome in this place”



In response to growing concerns about the cost of living crisis and rocketing fuel prices, Sheffield Methodist District launched a Warm Spaces seed funding scheme in September 2022.

£500 grants were offered to new or adapted sessions happening at least weekly throughout the winter where people could spend time for free in a safe welcoming non-judgemental inclusive environment. They were expected to be extensively advertised, shaped by local needs and equipped to signpost people to sources of specialist support.

Evaluations have now been received from most warm spaces. This evaluation draws out some key learnings from this feedback advice for future local mission, and some reflections for DLT on the grant process.

## Warm Spaces in numbers

**41 grants**

£20,500 of district

**310**

volunteer leaders

**19** adaptations of existing provision

**22** were new activities, of which **60%** will continue in some form

**1,900** participants, of whom

**1,400** not part of our worshipping congregations,

**600** not previously engaged with our churches

**70%** had people from their warm space accept invitation to other activities/ groups

## Qualitative impact

For many people in the neighbourhoods where our churches are based, our warm spaces had a significant positive impact this winter. In some communities the essentials of warmth and free food were needed, with warm spaces part of a network of vital cost of living support alongside food banks, debt and benefit advice.

However what participants consistently appreciated was opportunity for unhurried conversation, meeting friends, and making new friends. Overall our warm spaces reported that those who attended felt welcome. Some travelled considerable distances to attend because of the quality of this hospitality. When initially launched, Warm Spaces was designed as a response to the cost of living crisis, but it became clear that the most common positive impact we were making was in response to a social isolation crisis.

The numbers reported suggest that we were effective in making what we were offering known to new people. Given the thresholds to be crossed – entering a church building, joining a new group, in some cases the challenges of re-engaging with social interaction after COVID lockdown – there are likely more people

who would have benefitted from participating but were not ready to do so. This has been a reminder of the deep needs for social interaction in our neighbourhoods.

Warm spaces varied in what they offered and what was found to be effective. In some places communal activities were welcomed (games, quizzes, jigsaws etc), others space for conversation was preferred. A few warm spaces creatively used church catering/ café facilities to provide free meals.

Levels of attendance did vary significantly between Warm Spaces. In some cases this was because of particular controllable factors described below. Given that we did not know how people would cope with what turned out to be a relatively mild winter, the grant scheme and local churches rightly worked on the basis that it was better to offer something that might be necessary. Even in those warm spaces that will not continue, some new local partnerships have been formed and ideas for what the church can best provide instead have crystallised.

Some warm spaces have served to create times of regular fellowship for those within and on the fringe of the worshipping community, with these occasions shaped to be accessible for new people.

The majority of the new warm spaces will continue, some with adaptations to keep them sustainable such as meeting in winter only or targeting a particular segment of the population.

## Warm Space lessons for local mission

Some key themes have emerged from local evaluations of warm spaces, which are transferable to various forms of community outreach.

## Embedded Churches

*“We are part of People Keeping Well in .... group, facilitated by AgeUK and attended by local Councillors, Council Officers, representatives of other local churches and community groups.”*

*“the one thing we all do, all the time there, is have conversations with, and listen to people”*

Warm spaces were more likely to be targeted to real local needs, accepted as a safe place, and receive referrals, if the church is already closely integrated with its neighbourhood. This needs to be done pro-actively to build trusting relationships. Ideally it should be a shared enterprise amongst members of the church – to avoid needing to start afresh if a key member (or the minister) moves on. Key people to start networking with could include other churches/ worshipping communities, local councillors, residents’ forums, GP surgeries, schools, food banks, PCSO’s.

*“we have asked the local people who use the Church and food bank and this suggestion came directly from them.”*

Being embedded also works on an informal level – are new people actively welcomed and listened to?

**Next step: Who could your churches’ leaders meet with to discuss neighbourhood needs? Remember to ask their advice for who to meet next. If you are struggling for time to meet new people, perhaps you need to pause a church activity to free up time.**

## Flexible Persistence

*“For the first three weeks we didn’t have any visitors, perhaps because it was dark and wet? We had envisaged children who received free school meals coming with their families after school, and had advertised via the school. So, we changed the time and opened earlier, still didn’t get any families/children but the older members of the village started coming.”*

Many of our warm spaces that were new activities got off to a slow start, and so had to practise combination of keeping up efforts to advertise, whilst experimenting with changes to how they advertised and what they offered. We shouldn’t expect to get everything in a creative experiment perfect first time around. Thomas Edison famously described how he didn’t suffer thousands of failed experiments before perfecting his lightbulb, instead that he undertook a process of invention with thousands of steps.

*“We will keep discerning. Better to try and fail than not try!”*

*“Folk were asked if they would like activities, such as books, magazines, crafts or jigsaws but were happy to just meet up and chat.”*

Warm spaces also evolved what they offered in response to conversation with those who attended. This is important both for the specific knowledge gained, but also more broadly to soften service-provider power dynamics. Provision of hot food was a key reason for attending in most places where it was offered – but not in all cases.

**Next step: How could you gather suggestions for improvement from the people who attend activities run by your church?**

## Publicity

*“In the future, we will advertise more in our local community. Rather than just putting up posters, I think we need to do a leaflet drop around the streets round the church.”*

The most effective forms of publicity varied from place to place – another benefit of being embedded churches is knowing where to advertise. Impactful warm spaces used multiple and repeated ways of advertising. Often effective as part of this mix were social media (including sharing to local community Facebook/ WhatsApp groups), prominent posters, personal invitations, widely distributed leaflets, local magazines/ newsletters.

Polite persistence in invitation is also important – people are more likely to respond to the fifth invitation than the first.

What to name sessions was a challenge. “Warm Space” was the language initially used by District. Giving people a positive reason to attend was better – making new friends, activities, hobbies, having fun together, growing local community, reducing carbon footprint. This was especially the case in neighbourhoods where social isolation was the primary need, or where poverty was not admitted to.

**Next step: How do you discover new activities in other community venues in your neighbourhood? Does your church advertise in these places?**

## Invitation to relationship

*“A few stayed and joined our Christian fellowship that followed Warm space. We also have a monthly “Senior Youth club “and a few now come to that too. Plus some now attend our Sunday service”*

*“We gave out Easter cards with details of our services. Two people from the group came on Easter Sunday.”*

The majority of Warm Spaces saw some people who attended accept invitation to join other groups run by or hosted by the church. Most of these were other midweek activities, reflecting the timing and purpose of the Warm Spaces. However a significant minority of those offering warm spaces also experienced people attend worship as a result of conversations held. Four factors are necessary for authentic evangelism in this context:

**Respect** – for the purpose of Warm Spaces as being inclusive non-judgemental safe spaces. If people want to attend warm space and nothing else, they must feel welcome on this basis and not preached at.

**Trust** – people are more likely to accept an invitation or recommendation from Warm Space volunteers who have taken the time to get to know them and demonstrated empathy.

**Invitation** – we must be ready and confident to invite people to other elements of our shared church life when this feels appropriate. This can be made more natural by having attractive leaflets or posters on display. Some churches were able to arrange Warm Spaces so that other activities flowed immediately afterwards to make the transition easier.

**Adaptation** – will other church activities be an equally inclusive environment for warm space attendees? What changes do we need to make to our worship or other activities to make them accessible?

**Next step: How could you help people who participate in one activity at your church to try a second one?**

## Warm Space lessons for district initiatives

What Worked Well

- **We can act quickly when we need to** – the grant process, online application form and safeguarding guidance were launched within two weeks of DLT deciding to launch the scheme, with 19 applications having been received by the end of October. This helped to reinforce a sense of urgency and encourage churches to be equally decisive.
- **Clear grant criteria** linked to the application form meant that responses could be quickly provided to applicants. Where recommendations for improvements to proposals were made, these were readily accepted. This was an improvement on our previous Keep Fishing seed funding programme, where applicants often had to provide extensive extra information in response to questions from the grant panel.
- **Simplified safeguarding** – as District Safeguarding Officer, Alison offered a template risk assessment and tailored safeguarding training, which helped applicants to engage with safeguarding of warm spaces. Hopefully this will have helped some churches get into the habit of discussing and recording risk assessments.
- **High level of awareness** – applications were received from all of our circuits and from 30% of our congregations. Intensive promotion was undertaken through a range of media including speaking at

meetings, district news email, social media, blogs, personal contacts and following up on initial enquires.

- **Consistent with our DNA** – warm spaces aligned with a national conversation and the social justice heart of our congregations (“we must”) and thoughtful application of the skills we possessed could make a meaningful impact (“we can”)

*What have you learned  
about what your church  
does best?*

*“It offers a purpose – a  
hand of friendship.”*

*What will you do in the future?*

*“keep loving people, keep listening  
to people, keep offering  
relationship with God in an  
accessible, open way and cheering  
people on as they walk a  
sometimes (often) fragile path”*

Even Better If

- **Setting expectations** – when we started the grants programme, we had little by way of reference points as to what we expected it to achieve. Data collected has given us some reference points that we may be able to use to set expectations for future initiatives.
- **IT access** - some applicants struggled with online forms (application form), and others struggled to access word documents (evaluation) – future schemes should include both versions.
- **Evaluation engagement** – at the time of writing, we are still awaiting some evaluations despite chasing for responses, which suggests that some churches may not prioritise evaluating their activities or are not aware of the risks of not abiding by grant terms and conditions.
- **Listen first** – given the urgency of the situation, we intentionally varied from missional best practice of taking time to consult widely and shape responses in partnership. Instead we defaulted to delivering a service what we thought other people would want. Encouraging more of a community development approach would likely increase the impact and sustainability of new initiatives.

Let us build a house where all are named,  
Their songs and visions heard  
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed  
as words within the Word.

Built of tears and cries and laughter,  
prayers of faith and songs of grace,  
let this house proclaim for floor to rafter:

All are welcome in this place

*Marty Haugen*