

How We Did It – Setting up warm spaces



It's estimated that more than 7 million households are in fuel poverty across the UK, a figure that is expected to reach over 10 million by the spring of 2023. With a difficult winter looming, councils are searching for innovative ways to support their residents.

In this instalment of our 'How We Did It' event series, we look at one popular approach – warm spaces. Alison Dunn of Gateshead Council shares her experience of working with local partners to set up a coordinated and collaborative warm spaces project.

Watch or read our interview below.

Could you tell us about your dual role, and why that's been important in setting up the project?

I am the Chief Officer of Citizen's Advice, but I'm also a service director in local government. It is a dual role, not a secondment. The reason for that is both organisations recognise, after a decade of collaboration, that we have the same vision and aspirations for our residents. We both want an equal society, and to eradicate poverty and disadvantage. Gateshead is an area of high deprivation and poverty, and when public health came back into the council from the health sector there was a real elevation of health inequalities as a driver for council activity. So, reducing poverty and inequality became the number one priority of Gateshead council, and they were looking for people to help drive that agenda. The obvious place to land was Citizens Advice.

The advantage of working in this way is that I can bring data into the council in real time. In a lot of the activity that the council does, there's a data lag, so it's always looking in the rearview mirror. But by working in this way, we're getting real time intelligence which told us as early as June that we needed to do something about warm spaces.

My dual role has a number of facets; it's about tackling poverty and inequality, but it's also about how the council can use its assets to better support voluntary and community sector (VCS) activity. It can't give grants to the extent that it used to, but it still has a huge amount of assets that it can share with partners, looking at how it uses its buildings, resources,

transport infrastructure, professional skills, land, economic buying power, all of those things. And then the reverse of that is how can the VCS support the council to achieve its objectives. COVID was a great example; the council started the COVID initiative off very much with itself at the centre, but we were able to flip that. It was the VCS that ultimately provided the emergency response and the council provided infrastructure underneath it.

Could you tell us a bit more about your warm spaces project and how it works?

For us, Warm Spaces is not necessarily bringing additional resource into our network. It's actually the rebranding and reconfiguration of existing resource in a lot of cases. There is a very obvious minimum standard for a warm space – it mustn't be cold. That might seem really obvious, but some of the organisations that have stepped forward have buildings that are very old and draughty. They've got the will, but not necessarily the infrastructure. There must be a free hot drink available at a warm space, there must be a warm welcome. The participating agencies must be included in our online digital directory, and they must display and adhere to the values and beliefs set out in our Warm Space Charter created in collaboration with the Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission.

In Gateshead, we have likened the cost-of-living crisis to COVID, such is the extreme nature of what our communities are going through.

They must also take part in some mandatory training. We recognised very early on that not all of the agencies that were stepping forward had a particularly deep history of dealing with the sorts of people that might turn up in a warm space. The training looks at things like how to get your venue ready, how to de-escalate conflict, what it means for people to be living in a cost-of-living crisis. Because you can imagine on a cold, snowy December day, somebody's sat there all day, it's five o'clock and the agency wants to close – how do they have that conversation knowing that they're sending them back to that cold space? It was important that we supported our agencies to really understand what they were letting themselves in for and to give them some tactics to deal with that.

The idea for Warm Spaces really came about because we recognised that we were never going to be able to afford all of the infrastructure required to create a warm space. So we started to think about how we could collaborate and we latched on to the Dementia Friend idea. The Dementia Friendly Society have created tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Dementia Friends across the UK. And they've done that despite having no control or ownership over any of the assets or groups that they've trained. Warm Spaces is a bit like Dementia Friends; there is an idea, there's a way of doing it, there's a brand, there's a belief system, but there's also absolute integrity and autonomy for the individual organisations to be able to bring their own flavour into it, as long as they're adhering to the minimum standard.

We are putting ourselves back in the role of enabler of VCS activity, much in the same way as we did during the pandemic. We did talk about using council buildings, but we decided that they would be our place of last resort. We know from COVID that it was grassroots organisations that had the biggest success in reaching the most vulnerable and disempowered

people. We wanted to repeat that success, so we primarily have VCS buildings, and the council buildings that we do use are more leisure-focused, library-type facilities that look less corporate.

WARM SPACES

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Can you share some more practical details on the project – what timelines did you work to? How many partners have you got working on it?

We started thinking about this in June, and we had our first warm spaces go live in mid-September. When we went out with an expression of interest in August, we did get some raised eyebrows. It was very hot and people were saying, ‘why on earth are you thinking about warm spaces, you should be thinking about ice banks!’ We thought really carefully about whether the timing was right, but we knew that if we didn’t do it, we wouldn’t have our warm spaces up and running for the winter. We were sure that we were in for a winter of discontent, so we just pressed ahead.

...reminding them of all the great things that we did in COVID, where all of that bureaucracy and red tape was thrown out of the window and yet no wheels fell off.

We didn’t have a huge amount of money, we use the Household Support Fund to fund our warm spaces. I do think one of the lessons learned is that warm spaces sit in the grey of the Household Support Fund – it’s not a perfect fit – but it was the only money that we had available. We also knew that we couldn’t afford to pay the full cost recovery of all the warm spaces. We were relying on our VCS organisations being willing to come with us on this journey, but we didn’t know for sure that they would.

At the outset, we started to talk to Citizens Advice and to our council of voluntary service, Connected Voice, about how we could maximise the take up from the VCS. They gave us some practical tips around the expression of interest – it started off being a bit of a dissertation on all things fuel poverty, but we got it down to four sides of A4. They also gave tips on the name; the first iteration was called a warm space network, rather than a network of warm spaces, which is where we landed. Their feedback was that if we call it a warm space network, there would be a fear from agencies that they are somehow getting themselves into an ongoing programme of meetings. And for £500, you simply can't expect that. Getting the wording right, really making it sound like a collaboration, was really helpful.

But for us, the magic bit of fairy dust is the work that we did with Gateshead Poverty Truth Commission. The idea started in an office and there's always a criticism that it's going to be top down and you're going to create something that people don't want. So we tested it with people who had lived experience of poverty. They gave us some fantastic feedback about the sorts of things that would encourage people to use the space. We created a brand that looked very community-focused, very warm and not 'council-y'.

They also helped us to create our Warm Space Charter, in which we set out the values and beliefs of what it means to run a warm space, what it means to go into a warm space, and what the red lines are. So, if you go into a warm space in Gateshead, nobody will ever ask you why you're there, you will not find housing officers or revenue and benefits officers. There are some warm space models where they are creating service hubs and they are equally valid, but that's not what we wanted in Gateshead. We wanted a network of places where people could go in psychological safety, without fear that anybody was going to speak to them about any of their problems. But at the same time, we wanted our warm spaces agencies to understand where to send people if those conversations did come up, because when you walk into a warm space, you're not separated from your problems and it's possible, as trust develops, that these conversations will start to happen.

It's been a collaboration of the willing, everybody's doing something different.

We kept the expression of interest really light touch, we used a Microsoft Form which asked questions like: who are you? What do you currently do? Why are you interested in a warm space and how do you think it'll operate for you? And if we give you £500, what will you spend it on? People chose to spend it on all sorts of things, some wanted to buy soft furnishings, some wanted a tea urn, some were going to put it towards their gas and electricity costs. But we're not monitoring what they've spent the money on, it's £500 so to be frank I'm not really interested in that. I'm interested in how their warm space is operating, how many people are coming into it, what's their experience of reaching out to people – that's what we are monitoring and evaluating.

It took a bit of negotiation internally to get us to a place where that form could be as light touch as it was, because we often revert back to our ways of doing things. We put the same amount of bureaucracy and red tape around a £500 payment as we do around a £250,000 payment, when the levels of risk are entirely disproportionate. When we first spoke to legal, we were sent a 40-page grant agreement for a £500 payment. In the end, we got it down to

two sides of A4 and it's now an offer letter, rather than a formal grant agreement. We've had to be a bit disruptive and challenge some of those behaviours.

For those who may be experiencing similar challenges, how did you convince them to relax these procedures?

Firstly, I'm very, very tenacious and not at all willing to accept my first answer. I am also a pragmatist; I found key players in the system that were sympathetic to me, including some very influential Cabinet members who I went to and said, "Surely, we're not going to make them do this, in return for this." And once your deputy leader steps into the space, there's not going to be much that gets in the way.

So, being tenacious, really talking to them about risk and the proportionality of some of the measures, reminding them of all the great things that we did in COVID, where all of that bureaucracy and red tape was thrown out of the window and yet no wheels fell off.

Everybody played their part, in a really great way. In Gateshead, we have likened the cost-of-living crisis to COVID, such is the extreme nature of what our communities are going through. We have made a cost-of-living motion in which we're declaring it an emergency. When you bring all that pressure to bear, people just rolled over in the end and said "Okay, that's the way we'll do it."

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What types of projects are being run as warm spaces?

Right from the start we had two forms of expressions of interest, one for those agencies that wanted a grant and one for those that wanted to be a warm space, but didn't necessarily want a grant. So even when our grant programme closed, agencies continued to register on the warm spaces directory. I was also really clear that just because they'd registered as a warm space, it wouldn't preclude them from getting any subsequent grants that we might have. So we've kept on accepting agencies throughout and we've got 75 in total.

We have some really left field ones; we've got a bowling club that's been doing all sorts of weird and wonderful community things including Nerf gun battles with primary school children on their bowling green. They're doing some phenomenal stuff. We've got a cricket club, we've got a hairdresser that is also offering free haircuts. And then we've got the organisations that you would expect – veterans' organisations, community groups, village halls, volunteer libraries, a whole range. But they're all doing something slightly different. For example in Citizens Advice we've created a living room area where we've got plants, tablets for people to browse the internet, soft furnishings, up to date magazines, and a book swap. People can just come and exist in that space, they can work in that space, but they will never be approached by Citizens Advice for the service.



We've got others that are doing crafts and singalongs and bingo and all sorts of things. It's a patchwork offer. We've got some that are for communities of interest: veterans' groups, groups for asylum seekers and refugees, groups for people who are experiencing mental ill health. But the majority of our network is open to the public and we are relying on VCS organisations to reach into their communities and get the right people in.

It's been a collaboration of the willing, everybody's doing something different. As a result, though, we have ended up with a Monday to Friday, nine to five offer. The next stage of developing our warm spaces will be to try and understand how we plug those gaps more strategically.

Alison Dunn is the Service Director of Community & Voluntary Sector Development at Gateshead Council and the Chief Executive Officer of Citizens Advice Gateshead. You can find out more about the [Warm Spaces project here](#).