Toolkit

Churches & Warm Spaces

DIOCESE of OXFORD

What is a Warm Space?



A Warm Space (or warm hub/warm bank) is a safe, warm (18-21°C) indoor place - such as a library, community centre, or church hall - where people can stay warm, connect with others, and take part in community activities during the chilly winter months. Many people come for the warmth, but stay for the community. In fact, some Warm Spaces end up running throughout the year because of the community they create.

With many people facing high energy costs, financial pressure, and loneliness, Warm Spaces can be a lifeline. Citizens Advice reports that 37% of Brits are worried about how they'll afford their energy bills in winter 2026. And around 7% of people in the UK experience chronic loneliness. Cold, damp houses can severely impact wellbeing and health, as can isolation and loneliness.



Warm Spaces are also a valuable way for churches to connect with and serve their communities, extending hospitality and generosity.

Many churches are already running activities that function as Warm Spaces, such as community lunches, coffee mornings, knit-and-natter groups, board game clubs, and toddler groups. There is opportunity to expand these to welcome more people.

What does a Warm Space offer?

A Warm Space can be as simple or as well-equipped as your church's capacity allows. At a minimum, it should provide:





- A warm, welcoming environment (ideally 18-21°C)
- Seating and access to toilets
- Drinking water and/or hot drinks.



You might also offer:



- Activities and social opportunities
- Children's toys and books
- Free or low-cost refreshments
- WiFi, tables, and charging points for study or work
- Advice and information on keeping warm and managing household costs.

Most Warm Spaces are free to attend, though some invite donations or run 'pay-as-you-feel' refreshments.

Spaces that include activities often attract people and help build stronger community connections.

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If you're running a Warm Space, consider registering with Warm Welcome Spaces. Registration gives you access to free resources, support, and funding opportunities. Your Warm Space will also be listed on their interactive map, helping people know your space exists. You can also take part in Warm Welcome Week each January, helping shine a light on Warm Spaces at the coldest and loneliest time of year.

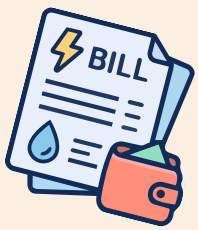
Consideration of energy bills and climate impact

Many churches face high energy costs, whilst also seeking to reduce their environmental impact. With this in mind, when planning your Warm Space, consider:

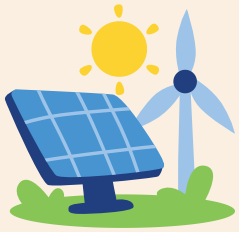
- Using a church hall or other smaller building, as these are often easier and cheaper to heat than the main worship space.
- Consider coordinating with other local churches and community venues so that local Warm Spaces are available throughout the week, even if you can only open yours for a couple of hours a week.
- Opening when your building is already heated, or extending the heating following existing activities such as toddler groups, lunch clubs, or coffee mornings.
- Exploring grants from your local council or community foundation for winter support projects.
- Following the Church of England's guidance on reducing church energy bills.
- Arranging for an Energy Audit to identify opportunities to improve energy efficiency and, where appropriate, introduce new technologies.

If a Warm Space is not possible in your context, there are many other ways your church can support people experiencing financial hardship and isolation - find more ideas and resources here. There are many other ways you can connect with your local community and build a sense of welcome and belonging.

And if your church building stays naturally cool during the summer, you could also consider becoming a Cool Space, offering a place of respite during periods of hot weather and heatwaves. Discover the Cool Spaces Toolkit here.







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How do I invite people to my Warm Space?

Publicising your Warm Space well will help people know they're welcome, whatever their faith, background, or income, and know what to expect when they arrive.



Carefully consider how you name your Warm Space. Names focused on warmth, hardship, or loneliness can feel stigmatising for many people. Instead centring both the name and the purpose of your Warm Space around an activity, belonging, or community may help people feel more comfortable attending, whilst also building stronger connections. Examples of Warm Space names include: Community Café, Meet & Eat, Coffee Stop, A Place to Be, or Winter Warmer.

Consider promoting it through:

- Clear outdoor signs with opening hours, and activities available.
- Share details with local councils, GP surgeries, and community hubs so they can signpost people to your space.
- Promote on church social media and local online groups.
- Display posters on local noticeboards or in community newsletters.
- Deliver simple leaflets to homes in your parish.





Other things to consider:

- **Opening dates:** Decide what dates you want your Warm Space to run. Many Warm Spaces open from late October (often once the clocks go back) until the end of March.
- **Opening times:** Set clear, consistent opening hours. Many spaces align their hours with morning or afternoon coffee sessions if they are providing hot drinks, or lunch hours if they are providing hot food. Others open during after-school hours. Warm Spaces aren't expected to open overnight (although some churches also host Winter night shelters).
- **Recording attendees:** Keep a simple log of visitors. If you're collecting personal data, ensure you follow GDPR guidance.
- **Volunteers/staffing:** Identify who will open/close the building, set up and tidy, welcome guests, answer questions, and run any activities. Decide if you need additional volunteers. You may want to identify a lead person for your Warm Space.
- **Budget:** Unless your building is already being heated at the time your Warm Space opens, you should consider the cost of heating as well as any funds required for refreshments, activities, or supplies. Consider applying for grants or contacting your local council about public health or community-space funding. If eligible, you might also be able to apply for a diocesan Development Fund grant.
- **Campaign:** People shouldn't be unable to afford to heat their homes, so call on your MP and join campaigns to call for sufficient wages and social support.
- **Insurance:** Check whether your parish insurance includes your Warm Space activities.



Warm Welcome Spaces also have a step-by-step guide to setting up a Warm Space.

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What rules & guidance should my Warm Space have?



Your Warm Space's rules/guidance will be guided by your context and what you're offering. These can be displayed on a poster or leaflet, and/or discussed with new attendees. If your Warm Space is hosted in your church's worship space, consider what behaviours will honour this holy space. As part of normal parish operations you should conduct a full risk-assessment.

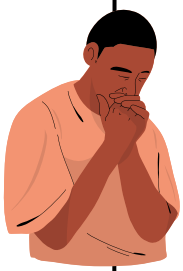
Consider the following:

- **Code of conduct:** expectations of respect and kindness between Warm Space guests, and towards volunteers and staff; prohibiting lying down or sleeping; designating your space an alcohol and drug-use free zone.
- **Noise:** can people play music, conduct phone or video calls, or would this be disruptive to others using the space?
- **Children:** how will you make it clear that children should remain in the care of their parents/guardians?
- **Pets:** will you permit pets or only assistance animals?
- **Safeguarding:** have you included your Warm Space in your safeguarding policy?
- **Capacity:** how many people can you safely accommodate at one time?
- **Emergency procedures:** what will you do in an emergency?
- **Accessibility:** is your space accessible and safe for everyone, including people with disabilities?
- **Food and drink:** will you will allow people to bring their own food and drink into the space?





Can a Warm Space offer prayers and worship?



When hosting a Warm Space in a church, most visitors will respect that they are entering a place of faith, which is also used for prayer and worship. You should consider how to ensure the space is welcoming to all who need it, regardless of faith or background.

You may already have services or prayers during the day which people can be invited to where appropriate. You could invite visitors to join ongoing church activities, or explore forming a new group if there is interest.

Another option is to offer an optional prayer or reflection time before opening or after closing the Warm Space, allowing people to participate if they choose.







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Cost-of-living support & signposting



Some people who attend your Warm Space may be struggling with heating bills or other household expenses. Ensure volunteers know what support is available locally so they can signpost people to the right help. Your church may already offer support directly (e.g. foodbanks, hardship funds, debt support, pastoral care) or have links with local organisations that can help. Citizens Advice is often a good starting point for support and advice. For more information on money, debt, employment, food, housing, and more, visit the diocesan cost of living webpages.



In relation to energy bills, it's also worth knowing that:

- Some households on means-tested benefits are eligible for a Warm Home Discount which provides money off energy bills.
- Many major energy suppliers offer payment plans, or can offer hardship funds and grants to help people struggling to pay their bills or with energy debt.
- Local councils may be able to offer emergency financial support or additional support for those struggling to afford energy bills.



Mary's Minis at St Mary's, Chipping Norton

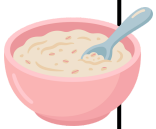


Churches are often gathering people through existing groups and activities. In many cases, these can be adapted to meet the Warm Space criteria, whilst also responding to the needs of those we are serving. St Mary's in Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire, has done exactly this through several of their community groups, including *Mary's Minis*, their weekly toddler group.



Mary's Minis originally met each Wednesday from 10-11.30am at the church's community hub. As part of their Warm Space plans, St Mary's initially considered extending the time to include a soup lunch, allowing parents, carers, and toddlers to enjoy a warm meal and more time in a warm space. However, when they spoke with the parents and carers, they shared that an earlier start would be more helpful, allowing them to come straight from the school run, rather than returning to a cold house first.

St Mary's listened and the group now begins at 9.15am, offering a warm breakfast such as porridge, toast, or warm croissants. Parents and carers come directly from school drop-off, share breakfast together, and remain somewhere warm and welcoming until 11.30am. The revised timing also fits well with family routines, enabling families to return home for lunch before younger children need an afternoon nap.





Emma Kennedy who looks after St Mary's Community and Outreach says, "Setting up a Warm Space doesn't always mean setting up something completely new. Often, it's about listening to the people you're serving, and adapting what you already do. It is important that we listen to those we serve, so we can bless them and work with them rather than 'do to'."