

- A partnership of public health researchers across six Universities in North East England & North Cumbria
- Working with policy makers and practice partners to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

What is the impact of providing warm community spaces on poverty?

The introduction of Warm Spaces - a network of safe, warm spaces where people can find temporary relief from the effects of fuel poverty, was in direct response to the ongoing cost of living crisis and the physical and mental health risks associated with cold weather during the winter of 2023-2024.

Since the launch of Warm Spaces across the UK by local authorities, it remains unclear whether they address poverty, reduce social inequalities or improve health outcomes. Currently, there is a lack of evidence-based practice supporting the Warm Spaces initiative.

Between July and October 2023 qualitative data was collected consisting of five focus groups (44 residents) across South, East, and West Gateshead. All participants were using a Warm Space, and recruitment was assisted by Gateshead Council's Communities, Health and Wellbeing Team.

The research was conducted by the Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) situated within Gateshead Council and in collaboration with researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, at Newcastle University.

The findings show that, while Warm Spaces are designed primarily to provide warmth, they serve a vital role beyond this. They have become places where friendships and informal support networks are formed and nurtured. It was also identified that these spaces are used by three different groups of people:

- Those experiencing poverty.
- Those not experiencing poverty but seeking community engagement.
- Those experiencing poverty and seeking community engagement.

The research also highlighted there are significant barriers in the current delivery model of Warm Spaces that constrain the initiative's reach and effectiveness. Such constraints include difficulties in reaching the most vulnerable populations who would benefit from using this service, travel barriers, a lack of awareness of the Warm Spaces offer, and the impact of signposting to appropriate support. Additionally, this research highlights the need to challenge stigmatisation to ensure that the most vulnerable residents can use Warm Spaces and to better reflect the initiative's offer to the community.

Key Findings

- Awareness of the Warm Spaces programme is limited, and those attending are doing so by chance, or rely on word-of-mouth communication. This suggests that more attention is needed on how to encourage the most vulnerable people to attend Warm Spaces to benefit from the community offer.
- Stigmatisation is associated with Warm Spaces. Firstly, poverty was perceived to be linked to the name Warm Spaces. Secondly, visitors are forming exclusive groups within their warm spaces. This leads to shared beliefs and ways of doing things that, if left unchallenged, may result in stigmatisation of people that would likely benefit from using Warm Spaces. For example, homeless people and those who are drug and alcohol dependent.
- There are travel barriers that impact visitors including being unable to use public transport due to limited mobility, poor mental health or the added cost. These are seen to limit the financial benefits of attending a Warm Space.
- There is evidence of a secondary benefit of Warm Spaces. They have developed into informal community areas allowing participants to socialise and connect with others building informal support networks.

Policy relevance and recommendations

- We recommend renaming the Warm Spaces initiative to address how the name may encourage stigmatisation through its association to poverty.
- Engaging in community consultation to involve local communities allowing each venue to address their local community needs, enhance inclusivity and allow their offer to be relevant and beneficial.
- Mapping Warm Spaces provision to maximise operating hours, improve service signposting, and address travel considerations that could encourage the local community to attend multiple Warm Spaces. This should also include the evaluation of the initiatives impact and engagement with seldom heard groups, who are not currently engaging with Warm Spaces.

Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, is a collaboration of six Universities in the North East and North Cumbria of Durham, Cumbria, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside.

Website: fuse.ac.uk/research/briefs

Blog: fuseopenscienceblog.blogspot.co.uk

Youtube: youtube.com/@FuseOnline

X (formerly Twitter): @fuse_online

Bluesky: @fuseonline.bsky.social

Follow Fuse on LinkedIn

Email: info@fuse.ac.uk



BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Research to understand the role of Warm Spaces in Gateshead was conducted by Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) in collaboration with researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, at Newcastle University.

The research was conducted across South, East, and West Gateshead between July and October 2023. This briefing showcases key findings and recommendations to develop a breadth of evidence-based practice to inform policy related to Warm Spaces and poverty reduction.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Dr Michael Johansen,
HDRC Gateshead Council and Research Associate,
Newcastle University
Email: michaeljohansen@gateshead.gov.uk

Dr Kate Haddow
HDRC Gateshead Council and Research Associate,
Newcastle University
Email: katehaddow@gateshead.gov.uk

Dr Olivia Mullaney
HDRC Gateshead Council and Research Associate,
Newcastle University
Email: oliviamullaney@gateshead.gov.uk



Photo by Centre for Ageing Better on Unsplash



The Centre for Translational
Research in Public Health