

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

26 JULY 2023

REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF HOUSING & A FAIRER STOCKTON-ON-TEES

EVALUATION OF WARM SPACES IN STOCKTON-ON-TEES 2022/23 AND NEXT STEPS

SUMMARY

This report provides an update to the Health & Wellbeing Board on the evaluation report conducted in June 2023 on the Warm Spaces in Stockton-on-Tees scheme. The initiative launched in October 2022 and has grown to a current membership of circa 60 venues, with feedback evidencing that many of them have become quickly established as key assets within their communities.

Outlined in this report is the key feedback from the consultation exercise carried out with participating venues and the plans for the scheme's development, widening the scope of its offer into a second phase throughout the autumn and winter into 2024.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Health & Wellbeing Board is asked to:

1. Note the report's key findings from the feedback report.
2. Endorse the proposed action plan and associated priorities for 'phase II' of the scheme, with a 2023-2024 timeline.
3. Note SBC Public Health's contribution of £30,000 per annum for this year (2023/24) and next year (2024/25) to support the bespoke development of Community Spaces in Stockton-on-Tees, building on what was achieved in the first phase of the Warm Spaces scheme and working towards long-term sustainability.
4. Agree to receive a further report to update on progress in late 2023.

DETAIL

Context and timescales

1. In response to the emerging challenges presented by the steep rise in utility prices which deepened existing disadvantage across vulnerable households, a network of 'Warm Spaces' was quickly coordinated by the Council's Fairer Stockton-on-Tees (FSOT) team in collaboration with partner organisations. More than 40 venues had signed up to open their doors by the scheme's [launch in October 2022](#). In essence, Warm Spaces are free of charge, non-judgemental public places where people can

go for shelter, save money on their household bills, and avoid social isolation while receiving vital support and advice to stay as well as possible.

2. In the launch phase, venues could apply for a funding grant of up to £500, committed by SBC Public Health, to assist them with the associated costs of opening a Warm Space.
3. The website features an [interactive directory and map](#) of venues across Stockton-on-Tees where visitors can filter by facilities and location to find Warm Spaces information.
4. Aligning with work to build a Borough-wide approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR), businesses and organisations were invited to financially support activities within Warm Spaces venues that would encourage greater footfall and engagement with the support on offer. This led to a series of [free family cinema screenings](#) held at ARC Stockton on Saturday afternoons throughout December 2022 and January 2023 with close to 1,000 people benefitting (an average of 122 people attended across the eight screenings), funded primarily by local haircare company Additional Lengths with support from other businesses in the Stockton Business Improvement District (BID). The [Cost of Living Help & Support leaflet](#) and [online hub](#), featured on the Council's homepage, were signposted to the cinema attendees and across the venue network.
5. SBC Community Services have partnered with the scheme to offer people living in rural areas and/or have accessibility issues with public transport the option to [apply for a Community Transport pass](#), to increase the opportunities for residents to reach a venue of interest.
6. Council partners Tees Active Leisure offer term-time subsidised sessions to help individuals and families to exercise and socialise.
7. Stockton Learning & Skills offer free courses across the Borough's Warm Spaces including creative writing, crafts, local history and art.
8. Stockton Borough Libraries and Family Hubs have acted as anchor venues within the network, often best placed to host and offer a wide range of services, facilities, events and activities across their branches to suit all ages and interests.
9. In February 2023, the Council's Warm Spaces in Stockton-on-Tees scheme and approach to adding activities for children and families was highlighted as a best practice example by the [Local Government Association](#). The scheme was also featured as a case study in the Martin Lewis' commissioned [Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals' guide](#) to setting up community warm spaces.
10. Interim consultation exercises were carried out in December 2022 and February 2023 to gain early insight from venues and to serve as a mechanism for the FSOT team and partners to act on emerging issues in support of the network. An annual evaluation was carried out in June 2023 and compiled into this feedback report which details the learning from the scheme's first year of operation and outlines proposals for its second phase of development.

Key feedback

Highlighted issues/areas of concern

11. Venues have a strong desire to host outreach activities and support services including food hygiene training to be able to offer hot refreshments, more Learning & Skills courses, sessions from various teams/services such as Stockton District Advice & Information Service/SBC Housing/mental health & wellbeing/PCP Community Wellbeing Champions/Stockton Food Power Network and others.
12. 32 venues have expressed interest in operating as a Safe Space to aid community safeguarding efforts.
13. There is a risk to venues deciding to no longer participate in the scheme if they cannot be supported with funding directly or assisted to access other funding opportunities.
14. Added value from outreach activities and support services bolstering Warm Spaces sessions is required to encourage footfall and aid strengthening the network.
15. Attendance grew over the worst winter weather before plateauing to the previously experienced levels but with a constant core of people attending regularly across most venues.
16. The name 'Warm Spaces' may stigmatise those attending venues solely open for the scheme and dissuade others, and it does not represent the wider offer in development.
17. Poverty in many aspects, particularly food insecurity, remain substantial problems across the Borough. Social isolation, loneliness and associated mental health issues are the other significant concerns.
18. Some venues have reported people attending who may not have sufficient capacity to help themselves including individuals with a learning disability.
19. Warm Spaces have become established, trusted and vital places for many people to go in their local community.
20. Accessibility remains a concern for people with disabilities and/or living in rural areas despite the SBC Community Transport offer being available.

Community impact

21. The feedback report details numerous accounts of the impact that Warm Spaces in Stockton-on-Tees has had, particularly in relation to combatting social isolation as a key concern affecting residents apart from the immediate pressures of the cost of living. Pertinent examples include:

'JD', a lady over 60 who lives alone and is dependent on benefits:

JD heard from a friend about the cooking sessions available at Norton Grange Community Centre and attended alone. She was partnered with a lady in her 30s and they enjoyed each other's company, subsequently attending the community pantry and lunch club the next day. They have continued to attend weekly to access low-cost and free food as well as enjoying a chat.

JD disclosed that she looks forward to the Wednesday sessions as it is the only time of the week she leaves her house and socialises, saying: "Everyone is lovely and friendly here and, honestly, I get lonely so I am glad this here. I struggle with my mental health but the food is lovely, I've made new friends...I am so glad I found out about all this."

'PM' a lady over 60 with mental health issues:

PM disclosed she is on medication to help with her mental health issues. Having previously been a school cook, PM was glad to be invited to a cooking session where she received a slow cooker and casserole cookbook free of charge. She believes this has saved her money on energy bills. Staff learnt she needed financial support and referred her to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) who have assisted with her immediate and longer-term issues, going "above and beyond" in her words. PM is regularly helped with emergency food parcels when the CAB are working on complex financial issues that can't be resolved overnight.

It came to light that some of PM's financial issues stemmed from supporting family members, who have since been offered supported and referred to services such as the Stockton-on-Tees Active Travel Hub as they were eligible for a free bike. PM has also been helped by Thirteen's Hardship Fund. PM said: "This community pantry and lunch club really is a godsend; I don't know how I would manage without it most weeks."

'Wayne' at Norton Grange's Community Pantry

Wayne is a single man in his 30s who depends on benefits and cares for his three children between Friday and Sunday each week, and regularly through school holidays. He lives in private rented accommodation which he struggles to afford and has severe mental health problems. Wayne has disclosed that he often does not eat for a few days to ensure he has enough food in stock for when his children visit over the weekend. He attends the pantry each week and regularly receives an emergency food parcel.

Staff have referred him to the CAB for financial support and advice. To aid his mental health, they have also facilitated access to training via Three13 and volunteer sessions to improve green spaces at St Michael's Church in Norton. Wayne has also been referred to the Green Doctor to receive emergency funds to get his energy supply reinstated at home.

Wayne said: "I've never received any support before and didn't know what help was out there, so I'm very grateful for the support that has been given to me." The CAB are currently working towards a personal independence payment award for Wayne which would improve his situation, alongside seeking more affordable housing.

'T' at Low Grange Community Centre:

T first attended the centre in December 2022, and she suffers from social anxiety and other health problems. She finds the centre very comfortable and welcoming. She has subsequently joined the craft group and regularly volunteers for Billingham Environmental Link Project (BELP) which has boosted her confidence significantly. T supports the Warm Spaces group, recently facilitating a seeded paper making workshop for attendees.

T welcomes people into the centre and helps to serve refreshments. Alongside another volunteer, she also runs a monthly car boot sale where any profits go back into the community to support children living in Low Grange. She is involved in setting up a project named Low Grange Children's Activity Group which intends to offer activities during the school holidays that are inclusive to all. Staff are delighted to report she has gone from strength to strength.

22. The FSOT team has commissioned [a video](#) to illustrate the community impact that the scheme, as part of the wider package of projects enacted by the Council and partner organisation to tackle the ongoing cost of living, reduce inequalities and social isolation, is having.

Recommendations from the feedback, action plan and next steps

23. Subject to Board endorsement, the FSOT team and key partners intend to work with the venue network to review and implement the following recommendations.
24. Rebranding the scheme to 'Community Spaces' as a headline, using 'Community Spaces with a warm welcome' where a strapline is appropriate, to reflect the year-round provision offered that goes beyond heated public spaces to include community interaction and access to support services.
25. Develop the appropriate venues to host holistic support and services encompassing health, housing, welfare, police/community enforcement, NHS, education and employment colleagues in a targeted, coordinated and well-publicised programme that maximises the benefit for services to provide sessions that are strongly attended.
26. Maximise the value of our Libraries and Family Hubs as 'best-placed' to deliver targeted support.
27. To link in with ongoing work by the FSOT team and Catalyst Stockton-on-Tees to explore a pilot Community Transport scheme to increase accessibility and attendance.
28. To explore the development of Safe Spaces provision at interested venues.

29. SBC Public Health to contribute £30,000 per annum for this year (2023/24) and next year (2024/25) to support the bespoke development of Community Spaces in Stockton-on-Tees, building on what was achieved in the first phase of the Warm Spaces scheme and working towards long-term sustainability.
30. Continued collaboration with SBC Marketing and Communications colleagues to promote the various aspects of the scheme's offer.
31. An indicative action plan detailing next steps and timescales has been drafted and included for Board members' review and comment. It is intended the plan will retain the flexibility to adapt to new and changing circumstances to best support the venue network.

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