



Nottingham Trent  
University

**School of Social Sciences**

**“SOMEWHERE YOU CAN GO AND KEEP  
WARM AND SOCIALISE FOR FREE”**

**Investigating the impact of the St. Ann’s  
Warm Space on Fuel Poverty and Social  
integration**

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## Executive Summary

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During the winter of 2022, over 500,000 people visited a warm space in the UK. More than 7,000 warm spaces were set up by voluntary sector and faith groups, libraries, and local authorities to support people facing spiralling fuel prices and the cost-of-living crisis.

This report presents the findings of a research project which focuses on a Warm Space established at St. Ann’s Advice Centre, Nottingham, UK. Given the limited knowledge of warm spaces, we aimed to understand the context in which they operate, the experiences of warm space attendees and to explore the role of a service provider.

We found that St. Ann’s Warm Space was an example of good practice, which responded to people’s multiple needs in various ways. It provided a refuge from the cold and addressed many of the vulnerabilities individuals were facing related to food and shelter. However, the Warm Space not only provided attendees with useful resources and advice which helped them to physically survive the winter, but also provided emotional support and a supportive community. We discovered that it functioned as an important “social space”, delivering community-based services, and helping to alleviate loneliness and strengthening support networks.

## 1. Introduction

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As the UK grappled with spiralling fuel costs and the cost-of-living emergency, local authorities and voluntary organisations set up 3,000 warm spaces throughout the UK in the winter of 2022. An audit report revealed the opening of 7,000 warm spaces, which were attended by an estimated 500,000 people (Warm Welcome, 2023).

Given the limited knowledge about these warm space initiatives, our research aimed to shed light on their impact in alleviating fuel poverty and addressing the cost-of-living crisis. The report also provides insights into the experiences of those attending and delivering the service.

Applying a single case study design that focuses on the experience of St. Ann’s Advice Centre in Nottingham, the report explores the wider policy issues which have created the need for warm spaces, and the gaps St Ann’s Advice Centre and Warm Space seeks to address.

## 2. Background

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Fuel poverty as a concept describes the “inability to heat the home to a socially and materially necessitated level” (Buzar, 2007, p. 225). In 2022, an estimated 3.26 million people in England were experiencing fuel poverty. Current projections estimate that fuel poverty will further increase in 2023, fuelled by an 178% increase in energy costs in only 12 months (Department for Energy Security & Net Zero, 2023), a cost of living crisis, substandard housing, and inadequate investment in energy independence (Bradshaw and Keung, 2022). The risk to energy poverty is particularly high for black and ethnic minority groups, households with children, lone parents, people on low incomes or unemployed, the

elderly and people with disabilities, long-term conditions (NICE, 2015; Marmot, Sinha and Lee, 2022) or chronic diseases (Tu et al., 2022).

Challenges arising from fuel poverty and limited access to energy services are affecting the ability of people to keep warm and has a direct impact on health, wellbeing and associated forms of vulnerabilities (Marmot Review Team, 2011; Petrova, 2018; Middlemiss, 2020). Cold homes increase the risk of physical diseases such as respiratory and cardiovascular conditions and is an identified risk factor for increased morbidity and excess winter deaths (Liddell and Morris, 2010; Hills, 2011; Marmot Review Team, 2011). Studies investigating the experience of fuel poor have also highlighted its negative impact on mental health, triggered by a persistent worry over energy consumption (Longhurst and Hargreaves, 2019). People experiencing fuel poverty often cope by rationing energy consumption, food, medication, or other essential expenses, (Sovacool, 2015). People often engage in energy-saving activities such as using food outlets and fast food chains to stay warm, using several blankets, or going to bed early (Harrington et al., 2005; Anderson, White and Finney, 2012; Middlemiss and Gillard, 2015). Energy poverty can also affect people’s social lives, with some reporting feeling ‘embarrassed’ about visitors, which has a negative impact on social participation and integration (Gillard, Snell and Bevan, 2017) .

The UK government has introduced various schemes to assist vulnerable households with bills, including the Winter Fuel Payment, Warm Homes Discount, and Cold Weather payments (Bolton, Kennedy and Hinson, 2023). These initiatives were consolidated with the Energy Price Guarantee (EPG) introduced by the Department for Energy Security (2023). The Energy Bill Support Scheme aimed at reducing energy bills for all UK households by £400 (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2022), and cost of living payments (Department for Work and Pensions, 2023a). Additionally, the Household Support Fund received funding of £500 million for each of the financial years 2021/2022 and 2022/23 to ensure that people could access essential items such as food and clothing (Department for Work and Pensions, 2023b).

However, these initiatives proved insufficient in responding to the high levels of fuel poverty and vulnerabilities people were facing.

Austerity policies implemented in the UK since 2010, which rendered private renting housing increasingly unaffordable and led to an increase in precarious employment, alongside the transition to Universal Credit and reductions in public services, have collectively resulted in deep-seated health and economical inequalities (Stuckler et al., 2017; Marmot, 2020). COVID-19 and the recent cost-of-living crisis have further intensified pre-existing inequalities, leading to more complex and multifaceted needs that the existing social welfare system is ill-equipped to address. The impact of the cost-of-living crises has been frequently highlighted in the news and organisational reports this winter (Gentleman, 2022; Lawson, 2022; Patrick and Pybus, 2022).

In response, community welfare projects and services have become essential to mitigate some of the current gaps, providing crucial assistance to people during the cost of living crisis and responding to their vulnerabilities (Parsell, Clarke and Perales, 2022). One of these community initiatives was the provision of free, warm and welcoming spaces. Over the course of a year, pubs, libraries, and various organisations, such as community centres or faith groups, established over 7,000 “warm spaces” across the UK (Warm Welcome, 2023).

These spaces typically offered a warm refuge, along with advisory services, affordable food and beverages, and phone charging facilities.

Combining observations and 21 semi-structured interviews with staff and attendees of a warm space located within St Ann’s Advice Centre, which provided one of the largest warm spaces in the city, our research contributed to a better understanding of the context in which warm spaces operate and the experience of those using the service. It also offered insights into the role of such spaces in the community and their effectiveness in combatting and mitigating fuel poverty.

The overall aims of this project are to understand:

- Ø who is accessing warm spaces, the reasons why they use this provision, and the services that they access in a warm space (the lived experience)

- Ø the aims of St Ann’s Advice Centre as a provider of a warm space and their experiences as a local service provider (policy on a local level)

### 3. Methods

We applied a single case study design, using complementary direct observations and semi-structured interviews (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

Direct observations helped us to gain a better picture of the context of the warm space, the services that are offered, and the people who attend. From February to mid-March 2023 at least one researcher participated at the warm space.

We triangulated observations with 21 semi-structured interviews (17 attendees, 4 staff). Interviews took place during warm space sessions.

Through the interviews we were able to obtain a more complete understanding of the value and impact of warm spaces for attendees and the community. Interviews with staff provided a managerial and organizational perspective of the warm space and challenges in sustaining the warm space. Attendees who agreed to be interviewed received a £10 shopping voucher.

Interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed (Ritchie and Lewis 2014), capturing the different nuances of meaning (Guest 2012). A preliminary coding framework with four main codes and categories was established after five interviews, which was added and amended as new sub-codes emerged in subsequent interviews.

The people who attended the warm space are referred to by pseudonym. People who attended the warm space will be referred to as “attendees”. Participant Demographics are listed in Table 1.

Number 5, 18, 20, and 21 were staff interviews. They are referred to as: Monica, Heloise, Sarah, and Anne.

*Table 1: Participant Demographics (self-reported) (Y=yes; N=No; F=Female; M=Male; NCC = Nottinghamshire County Council; ESA = Employment Support Allowance; UC = Universal Credit; PIP=Personal Independence Payment)*

ID	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Social Security Entitlement	Dis-ability	Disability Benefits	Property	Household size	Pseudonym
1	76-80	F	White British	State pension	Y	Attendance allowance	Own	1	Suzanne
2	71-75	F	White	Y	Y	Y	Rented NCC	1	Isobel
3	31-35	F	Mixed	Y	Y	in progress	Rented NCC	4	Michelle
4	61-65	F	English	Y	Y	Y	Rented NCC	1	Barbara
6	66-70	M	White European	Y	Y	N	Rented NCC	1	Patrick
7	91-95	M	White	State Pension/ Pension Credit	Y	Attendance allowance	Own	1	John
8	51-55	F	Not given	UC	Y	Sick pay from employer	Rented NCC	1	Elaine
9	31-35	F	Mixed	Y	Y	Y	Rented NCC	6	Alexandra
10	36-40	F	Asian	UC; child benefit	Y	N	Hotel (homeless)	2	Jasmine
11	66-70	F	White British	N	Y	PIP	Rented (Housing Association)	1	Aoife
12	51-55	F	Mixed	ESA	Y	PIP	Rented NCC	1	Sophie
13	36-40	F	Black African	N	N	/	Rented NCC	6	Beverly
14	26-30	F	White (other)	UC	N	/	Rented NCC	3	Lisa
15	61-65	M	White British	Pension Credit	N	/	Rented NCC	1	Sam
16	36-40	F	Black-African	UC; child benefit	N	/	Rented (Housing Association)	2	Danielle
17	31-35	F	White British	UC	Y	N	Rented NCC	5	Jess
19	Not given	M	White British	ESA; State Pension soon	Y	Applying for PIP	Rented NCC	1	Robert

In the following section we will give a brief overview of the Warm Space, its participants, and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis that created a need for the Warm Space. We will then



discuss the impact the Warm Space had on the mental and physical well-being of the participants, and the contribution to social integration and the community.

## 4. St. Ann's Warm Space

The Warm Space is located in the heart of St Ann's close to the city centre, in St Ann's Advice Centre.

St Ann's is a ward in Nottingham City Council with a population of nearly 25,000. It is ethnically diverse and is ranked as the fifth most deprived neighbourhood in the city out of 182, and nationally ranks as the 453rd out of 32,844 measured areas (Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, 2019). Recent research which has focused on the neighbourhood of St Ann's (Bissell et al, 2018, p. 1148) emphasises its strong community ties and a 'protective ambivalence', where participants expressed a pride in the area while at the same time acknowledging the challenges it faces and the often-negative stereotypes associated with the area.

Fostering this community sense, the Advice Centre has been established in the community for more than 40 years, providing social welfare law advice in the categories of debt and welfare benefits. The Advice Centre is already used as a community hub and café and since 2012 a food bank has been delivered from here.

Seeing many of those attending services at St Ann's struggling with the rising cost of living and energy, the staff of St Ann's Advice Centre successfully bid for council funding. The funding was supplemented by the Advice Centre's own funding which helped to employ a staff member to run the café, deliver subsidised food for meals, and offer social activities.

The Warm Space had a very welcoming atmosphere and was comfortably warm. The space had plenty of room for chairs and tables and a large area to serve food. It was a family friendly environment and children were often taking part in the activities. When we arrived, people were usually already sitting around the tables and chatting. Music and conversation filled the space.

The rapport between the staff and service users was striking to us. Staff knew the attendees, normally by name. As soon as someone came into the warm space they were welcomed and made to feel comfortable. Staff mingle with the service users and care for each other. As **Michelle** puts it, they are “*trying everything they can*” to support attendees. The good relationship between staff and attendees also became apparent in the interviews we conducted, with attendees referring to staff as “*brilliant*” (**Elaine**), and “*dedicated*” (**Beverly**).

### 3.1 Who were the attendees?

The demography of the attendees at the St Ann's warm space broadly aligns with the groups disproportionately affected by long-term economic and policy trends. Ages ranged between 29 and 76. There was a clear gendered dimension to attendance at the warm space, over 80% of research participants were women, and of these 7 described the financial and practical challenges of looking after dependent children. The female participants were also more open in talking about their experiences which is reflected in the balance of the participant quotes

in the findings. **Monica** who is a staff member indicated that the stigma to ask for help seemed a greater barrier for men who “*don’t want to admit that they’re struggling*”.

Over 70% of participants lived in social housing, one person lived in a hotel provided by Housing Aid. Two participants owned their property or had a mortgage. 76% self-identified as having a disability, including diabetes, arthritis, COPD, leukaemia, and mental health issues. Seven were receiving disability benefits or sick pay from an employer. Two are in the process of applying.

Over 40% of participants were from a minority ethnic group, we interviewed one refugee as part of this research. The majority of attendees indicated that they had used services at St. Ann’s before.

Most people who attended lived locally, only two of our interviewees attended from another part of the city and used a bus or a car as transport. The proximity of the centre to their homes contributed to their regular attendance. Fourteen of the attendees said that they attended on most weeks that the warm space operated from when it started in December 2022. Many of them came to the Advice Centre several days a week to access other services.

While the Warm Space was promoted on the City Council’s social media, the majority had found out about the warm space through their social networks and friends:

*I’d seen my friend... I was walking along, and I seen my friend come out and said, where you been to? I’ve been in there he said, for a breakfast he said, cheap, £3 a breakfast. I said, well I’ll come down there tomorrow, and I’ve hardly missed a day since then. (Elaine)*

Only one attendee (17) attended for the first time during our research.

### 3.2 The Impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis for Warm Space Attendees

The cost-of-living crisis has affected millions of families and households in the UK. People, particularly those on low incomes, are unable to cope with the rising costs of energy, food, and housing costs and were pulled into poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation stated (Earwaker, 2022), that “hundreds of thousands of low-income households” cannot afford enough food, heat and clothing at the same time.

Looking for a way to cope with the cold, Warm Space attendees were grateful for the extended hours the Advice Centre was operating and the provision of warmth and affordable meals.

While some attendees received a degree of support through fuel vouchers from British Gas and the housing support fund between October 2022 and March 2023, the increase in fuel prices was difficult to manage for many of the attendees. As **Suzanne** has put it:

*It’s just everything’s just gone stupid, it has, really stupid. Everything’s gone up and up and up, gas’s gone up and electric’s gone up, the food’s gone up.*

Only two of the participants mentioned that they had felt no difference compared to the previous year, and for one individual, the situation had slightly improved. Participants had to make stark choices, such as cutting back on transportation and driving the “*car to the places*

*I want to go to” (Aoife), clothes (Jess, Barbara), internet, phone bills (Barbara, Patrick), television and devices the children were playing with (Jess), and even laundry (Lisa). Suzanne mentioned that in order to keep warm, she was “not really late in bed [...] Because you can’t afford to put your heating on can you, you know?”*

*I’m just having to watch what I buy. Because I buy prawns and things like that, well I’ve had to cut back on them, because they’ve gone up. And I won’t buy cow’s milk, because it goes off, so I buy UHT milk. And it’s cheaper and Aldi’s, it’s only 75p, because it’s over £1 in Tesco. Because Aldi’s is my main shop. (Isobel)*

*So I’ve always budgeted okay. This is my money for electric, this is my gas money, this is food money. And now I find myself saying, ‘ooh, if I put a little bit more on the gas,’ but that means I’ve got less for food. Ooh if I take a bit from the gas to buy food, ooh what if we run out of gas? Never had to do that before. Just because I know that if I put this much on, every month, that’s enough to last us. (Jess)*

Some of the attendees felt trapped in a vicious circle where any compromise had an effect of another part of their life:

*So you’re going to cut down on what to buy on the foods for you to do the heating and the electricity. Because the electricity, you can’t go without a fridge, you can’t go without cooking, you’ve got to do it. (Danielle)*

*they’re telling me to lose my internet to pay my rent. I said, well I need the internet to try and help me find a job. (Michelle)*

Eight attendees (1, 3, 9, 10, 13, 16, 17, 18) also described how they were struggling to keep the house warm and had to reduce the hours the heating was on, which was a particular problem if they were in a household with children or suffering from a health condition.

*I’ve noticed that because my house is getting damp, my baby (name) is poorly a lot, coughs, colds. When I feel him, it’s obviously, he doesn’t walk, so he’s on the floor a lot, which means he’s feeling the cold, he’s crawling around. He doesn’t ever feel warm to touch in my house. Like his hands and feet are always cold. (Jess)*

Having an existing health condition, such as arthritis, often meant a choice between physical pain or compromise in other areas of their lives, just to be able to keep the heating on: *“I had to have the heating on then because of the pain in my joints, I’ve got to stay warm, otherwise I’m in agony.” (Isobel)*

In order to keep themselves and their families warm, participants applied different strategies, such as using hot water bottles, hats and gloves, heating only one room, and or by staying in bed:

*When he’s at school, to maybe go out, walk around, try to tidy the home, or stay under the blanket. This is what I used to do when I was pregnant, I was just you know, he was at school; I would stay under my blankets. That’s all, when he comes back, I put the heating on. (Jasmine)*

The constant worry and living in a cold home took a toll on mental and physical health. Five participants reported that the cold affected their or their family's physical health: (1, 2, 11, 13, 17):

*By the time I get into bed I've froze, but it's so cold, it's so cold. (Michelle)*

*He didn't want to eat, because he was cold at home, he couldn't wash, he'd only got the electricity, [...] So he'd got electric, but he'd got no heating. (Heloise, Staff)*

For Jess, the physical pain came from not being able to eat properly:

*And that extra meal that I'm saving is an extra say £5 to go on the gas. But then you start to get the belly ache and the feeling ill because you've not eaten properly. (Jess)*

Attendees also struggled with their mental health (1, 6, 7, 9, 17). This was mostly due to anxiety over being able to keep their family warm and fed, and to the pay the bills and were “*frightened to put your heating on too long*” (Suzanne).

**Jess**, for example, described constant worry and financial constraints that increased her anxieties:

*And if you already catastrophise, I sit there and think, oh are my kids warm enough, can I afford... constantly, I check my gas meter every day. Like [...] am I going to be able to keep them warm?*

*Quite often I sit there and cry, and it's not because of, that something's upset me, it is like, what am I going to do next week, because I can't afford to do what I need to do. And it's not even extra's you know. We no longer buy snacks, in the sense of my kids have always had a pudding after their dinner. Whether it be a yoghurt, a piece of fruit, and not it's, okay, we're not doing puddings, it's breakfast, lunch and dinner, because that's what I have to do, anything else is extra.*

As a response to the increased mental health challenges, St Anns Advice Centre is in the process of establishing a "mental health hub" to offer immediate support and resources.

Staff also felt that the energy and cost of living crisis had created a higher reliance on social security benefits, fuel vouchers, emergency food provision, and an increased demand for debt advice (1, 6, 8, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17). The higher reliance on services and support was more pronounced for older attendees, or those with a disability, or chronic disease. These participants often needed a warm home to support their health conditions. **Lisa**, for example, felt as if the current situation “*forces you to [...] depend on benefits*”.

The increased reliance on benefits, fuel vouchers, and food banks placed added burdens on the community-run Advice Centre. Participants found themselves navigating complex and bureaucratic systems to access the support they required.

Attendees mentioned that they missed out on vouchers due to lack of awareness about eligibility, being on the "wrong" benefit, or uncertainty about how to claim support:

*A lot of people don't understand the difference between means tested benefits and income related benefits. So people would come thinking they're on a benefit, they're entitled to it, but if they're on income related then they can't. So it's very, yeah... And then there's also*

*households where their electric or gases are included in the service charge for their rent, so they're not able to claim those vouchers either. (Sarah, Staff)*

*I remember when everybody got this 300, the first time, I didn't get that, and I didn't get the next 300. I don't know if it's because of what pension I was on. Someone said, if you're on State Pension or if you're on Pension Credit, you get it or you don't, and I couldn't remember what I was on. (Elaine)*

*I've been kind of missed out, because it's a very selected area where I live. And they think because you've got a house and that, you've got loads of money. (Suzanne)*

The complexity of the benefits system, coupled with long waiting times for voucher applications, resulted in widespread confusion and frustration among people accessing these services, as emphasised by Hanson et al. (2022). The sheer volume of applications overwhelmed the system, with some individuals waiting for several months for the support:

*Because they've been waiting for these vouchers a long time [...] you can understand people's frustration because you need the, you need the money now, you need the gas and then you're telling someone you know... Yeah, you've applied for it, but you're not gonna get it for 8 to 12 weeks. How unrealistic and disappointing is that. (Sarah, Staff)*

While the vouchers and government initiatives were seen as a “*sticking plaster*” (Heloise, Staff) for difficult times, the complexity often further increased the worries and anxieties participants were experiencing:

*So much [of people's knowledge] was incorrect, so you know, people thought they could apply every fortnight for the fuel costs but it was one pot, literally it's one pot every ten months or something. So people were so misguided. And then people thought everyone could get the emergency ones, but they were only for people that were on prepayment and then people didn't understand about tariffs whether they're on standard tariff or the higher tariff and you know making sure it was correct at the 1st of April when the prices... so all of that very, very confusing for people, confusing for me because imagine if you've got disability, mental health, or learning disability, you're hard of hearing. You don't know you're worried pensioner what... you've got alcohol misuse or drug misuse... (Sarah, Staff)*

The heightened reliance on benefits also exacerbated feelings of stigma among participants, who grappled with perceptions that they couldn't adequately care for their families.

*So for me to attend somewhere, where they're giving away free food and things, it makes me feel like people might be, oh she can't look after her kids, she can't feed them. (Jess)*

### 3.3 The Gaps the Warm Space fills

The Warm Space was established to help St Ann's residents with the consequences of the cost-of-living crisis and fuel poverty. Every Wednesday afternoon, people could drop-in and remain in the space until the 7pm. The Warm Space would offer them warmth, food and advice. Two bingo sessions were usually held towards the end of the session. Prices included vouchers, cash, or groceries which had been donated by the council. They also organised special activities during festive periods. For Christmas, for example, a “*Santa [was] in there, and the free hotdogs, free chips. So it was full of people here. (Jasmine)*”



## Keeping Warm

By introducing extended opening hours, those who used services at St Ann’s were able to keep the heating off for longer and save on energy.

*Especially in the winter time, by the time they go home, it’s dark. You might have something easy, something you know, small, soup. You go, you watch a bit of television, you go to bed. (Monica, Staff)*

While not everyone attended the warm space to stay warm, it was a recurring theme among participants who turned off electricity and gas at home while attending the warm space. (1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 14, 15, 17)

*I keep the heating off while I’m here to be honest, otherwise, what’s the point? And then when I go home, I put for like one hour, and then go sleep, so it’s good. (Elaine)*

The warm space also meant that participants did not have to worry about the heating for a few hours. Jess, for example, described, how regulating the heating has affected activities their children were able to do: *“So it’s nice for them just to be children, and not sit there like, oh shall we turn the heating off now?” (Jess).*

## Providing Resources

St. Ann’s Advice Centre also received British Gas vouchers to distribute to people on prepayment meters and successfully applied for further funding to provide emergency fuel and food vouchers for people in the community. Notably, the later proved to be invaluable to assist people in urgent situations:

*Because I was like no heating, nothing. So I just called, and I say, look I don’t know what to do. And then they just send me a voucher for electricity and stuff. That’s all, that’s all. (Elaine)*

*She gave me £50 of food vouchers, she said, take... (Isobel)*

Anne emphasises that, because they would usually not require participants to “prove” their eligibility, reduced the risk of stigmatisation and barriers around eligibility and waiting list:

*If people were sort of struggling, we took people’s word for it really, because why wouldn’t we do that you know? People don’t... we know that people who use our foodbank, you know, the vast majority are very; don’t feel very comfortable about it you know. They feel slightly embarrassed so that, and they don’t need to, but they do. And I think that’s the same with the vouchers as well you know. People said, I’m struggling and I’ve got no gas and electric, and I’ve got a baby. Why would we say, oh you’ve got to prove it, you know. (Anne, Staff)*

While energy vouchers were the most obvious resource to help mitigate fuel poverty, even small gestures made a big difference. For example, the centre was able to offer a slow cooker to one family who was cooking on an electric cooker which had cost them around £4.50 a day in electricity.

To support energy efficiency and help people through the winter, the Advice Centre also distributed donated items such as winter cloths, hot water bottles, hats, snoods, socks, gloves, blankets, hot water flasks, and even air fryers, slow cookers, heaters.

## Social Welfare and Energy Advice

Seeking advice about welfare benefits became one of the main reasons for many to attend St Ann's in the first place, from where they often stayed on, accessing other services including the warm space (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18). Equally, for new attendees, the warm space often served as an entry point for accessing other services:

*New people as well came along, and started to find out what was in the centre, and all the other services that we could support them with. Which also was one of the ideas that we had hoped would happen. (Anne, Staff)*

As people were struggling to stay informed about the benefits and vouchers they were eligible for, attending the warm space was helpful in keeping up-to-date and understanding their rights:

*Sarah has sorted, she's sorting things out for me. This is it you see, when you've got nobody to sort anything out for you, you can come here, they help you. Which is good for me, because I don't know how to do things, I've never been on benefits or anything (...) Because I don't get to know anything if I don't come down here. I don't get to know what's going on, or what you can apply for. (...) So they're really helped me out a lot. (Suzanne)*

As such, the warm space served as an *“immediate place where peoples worries, questions about energy cost of living could be answered and dealt with unsupported, straight away.” (Sarah, Staff)*

Attendees provided us with several examples of how staff were able to provide legal, financial, and social support. **Heloise**, for example, recounted how she had a client who has *“had no heating for two years”* due to his meter being capped: *“he didn't want to eat, because he was cold at home, he couldn't wash. [...] So he'd got electric, but he'd got no heating”* and how they were working with the council to solve the issue.

Warm Space staff also emphasised that they wanted to provide a space to get people to *“understand [energy efficiency] a bit more”*. They wanted to inform people about the cost-of-living payments, while also thinking about *“turning off the lights, you know, do I have to put the heating on because there are better ways I can use my heating. Can I use the timing system? Cause some people haven't done that before and never just put it on and off and, so yeah, reducing the real cost [of energy]”*. (**Sarah, Staff**)

The effectiveness of this has been corroborated by the attendees who felt that the advice helped to *“get your bill down”* (**Patrick**). Another attendee recounted how they received advice on keeping *“the thermostat as low as you can go, because it's going to save you money”* (**Michelle**), making sure that lights are out and curtains drawn.

Energy advice was sometimes incorporated into the social activities. St. Ann's Advice Centre trained an advisor to City and Guilds, Energy Efficiency, Level 3, and incorporated their knowledge into an “energy efficiency bingo”:

*So the last evening we did the bingo and the raffle were all based around air fryers, slow cookers, heaters, all the things that would support families at home. [...] [staff] did the energy bingo game, so that was sort related to, you know, questions around energy efficiency and things like that. So it was learning as well as enjoying (Sarah, Staff)*

## Food

During the observations, we found that food was an important element of the Warm Space and created a welcoming atmosphere.

The number of families and individuals who became unable to afford food and were reliant on food vouchers increased during the winter. This is corroborated by several research studies that suggest that food expenditure is affected by energy expenditure (Snell, Lambie-Mumford and Thomson, 2018; Barrett et al., 2022), and that households cut down in energy spending to meet food bills (Dowler et al., 2011) or vice-versa (O'Neill, Jinks and Squire, 2006; Anderson, White and Finney, 2012).

According to staff, they gave out a higher number of food vouchers than usual. And even *“once those shopping vouchers had finished, people were still struggling” (Sarah, Staff)*

To respond to this emergency, part of the funding from the council was used by the warm space to subsidise the food that was sold in the café, *“so people that did have breakfast and the meal, it would be £5 for the whole day rather than paying them separate so that kept a lot of people in for the whole day” (Sarah, Staff)*. This was supplemented with donations which allowed for low prices on the food. The café was also linked to the food bank, allowing some of donations to be distributed among the community.

The importance of the provision of food was also emphasised in our interviews and mentioned the most frequently by interviewees when asked about their reasons to attend the warm space (29 references in total) (1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19):

Participants particularly praised the affordability and the quality of the food. Any leftovers were distributed at the end of the session, and many participants often left the Warm Space with a bag full of food.

*Like it's quite good to come, because I found out I could get food here at a reasonable price you know, breakfast £3. You can't cook it. A dinner for £3 with a sweet and a free drink, you can't cook it. (Sophie)*

*Some marvellous cooking (...), she cooks beautiful, she does some lovely cooking, she does, yeah (Suzanne)*

*After lunch, whatever's left, sometimes they hand it out, so obviously I've ended up with jacket potatoes today. (Michelle)*

For many, it was getting *“a proper meal” (Lisa)* for the day.

## 3.4. Enhancing Social Integration in the Community

A key observation we made was that people connected to the warm space in a special way and supported each other.

Despite all the issues people were facing, attendees established a network of friends and a tight community that supported each other through the difficult winter. (3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17)



*I think that people may have originally come because of [saving heat], but I think that people got far more from it. So yeah, definitely, somewhere, space for people to come and feel safe. (Anne, Staff)*

The Warm Space was different in this regard to other services offered at St Ann’s Advice Centre:

*This is the first time I've seen like quite a large group of people come together where they're spending days and days in days out with each other and doing stuff outside the centre. So they're going to each other's houses now, which they've never done before, they're going shopping together or they're, you know, they're planning day trips, they're going to town, they've never. Yeah, they never did that before. (Sarah, Staff)*

*You're even getting people off the streets who you wouldn't normally see come in. And finding that the fact that they can come in here, whether they know anybody. But by the time they've gone out, they've linked in with the regulars, and they're coming through, and they're dripping through. (Heloise, Staff)*

The importance of friendships and the community at St. Ann’s was also mentioned frequently among the participants.

*It's made a lot of difference, meeting new people, that was one of them. And I talk to everybody that comes in. Get a new one, I'll say, oh what's your name, and they'll tell me. So that's been good. (Isobel)*

Participants from different nationalities, ethnicities, ages, and generations were coming together, forming meaningful friendships:

*Different remits of people so all... unemployment, we had elderly people and we had families in, we had single people in, we had couples like, say, all diverse backgrounds, diverse ages. I think what it did do was really that specific time, then meeting every week that we have cemented some really good relationships. So people have formed some really good friendships out of it... (Sarah, Staff)*

The diversity was also greatly valued by the attendees who found it an opportunity to “*make friends with people that they may not have made friends with otherwise.*” (Monica, Staff)

The connections they formed had a notable impact, particularly on the older participants, who became more sociable as a result:

*Some people say they don't come out at night time. But when there's a group, and you'll find even younger ones will say, well come [Suzanne], I'll walk you home. Now that's community. [...] I know the other will look after them. So that's where this community works together. (Heloise, Staff)*

**Isobel**, for example, who uses a wheelchair, says that the Warm Space has “*been very good, because I've made new friends. And I've got somebody that's been coming to visit me on a Saturday, which has been good.*”

## Overcoming Loneliness

Due to the strong sense of community that developed, attendees (1, 3, 7, 13, 17) stressed how the Warm Space played a significant role in making them feel more socially included. According to **Sarah**, many of the people “*lost the confidence in coming out*” during social isolation during COVID-19, and the Warm Space helped people with gaining that confidence again.

The lack of social integration has also been highlighted by attendees:

*So I wasn't seeing anybody you know, and I was getting very, very depressed. So [Michelle] says, well come down to the Hut, down St Anne's. (Suzanne)*

*I just come, you know rather that sit on at home on my own, and worry. Because when I'm at home, I just clean. Not like there's anything to clean, because my OCD's already been. [...] I was secluded at home a little bit, and my circumstances at the moment, and I wasn't feeling too clever in myself. So I'm like hiding away with it. But hiding away with it was making nothing for me. So they were sort of saying to get out your house, and I though, yeah. (Michelle)*

**Monica** mentioned that being able to “*walk [to the warm space], you see you friends*” has also helped attendees with their mental health issues:

*One of the ladies, she came yesterday; she's not been out of the house for months. And I keep saying to her, come, come and have a cup of tea, you don't have to stay all day. Come, have a cup of tea, there's you know, apart from the fact you'll know everyone. And she was there, I think it was the day before yesterday, and she was here nearly all day.*

She attributes that to being in company and finding “*that they're not the only ones going through certain things*” and are therefore much needed spaces for the community.

## Support

After a few sessions of the Warm Space, people started to attend regularly to socialise. The connections they made helped them in various aspects of their lives. One participant said that it helped them through their bereavement. Attendees also supported each other through illness and “*the dark times*” (**Sarah, Staff**).

Isobel, for example, told us that they raised money for one of the attendees who had a stroke. When someone was unwell, or missing for a few sessions, the other attendees watched out for each other and drew them back in:

*They call her, she rang me up, because they hadn't seen me. And wondered how you know. And I told, like I hadn't been very well and that. Oh well she said, 'we were worried about you'. I mean, how nice is that, you know what I mean. (Suzanne)*

*It's like last week, I wasn't very well, so I wasn't in here for three days. Then [attendee], my friend, who's been coming round, she came round to see me, what the problem was. And I way, oh the pain's too, too much. I couldn't come out, and it was cold last week. I've got cosy toes that they do on baby pushchairs, it's like a sleeping bag, and I spilt my dinner on it yesterday. But somebody's going to do my washing tomorrow or Friday. (Isobel)*

*So my friend was in a right mess the other day, she was crying. So I took her here, she had some lunch, she was alright. I said, but yeah, you just need to get out, but you know, staying in is just not good at the moment. (Michelle)*

During one of the session we attended, one person fell asleep and several of the attendees went over to make sure the person was OK and if they had a way to get home. Staff supported this evidence that everyone was “*keeping an eye on each other you know, exchange numbers. They don’t come, and you don’t see them more than two days, where are they, have you seen them, has anybody seen them?*” (Monica, Staff)

As many of the participants went through similar difficulties, the Warm Space almost served as a support group, “*somewhere you can go all the time to get that support if you need it. It’s available. [...], a group of people in the community are struggling and responding to that.*” (Sarah, Staff)

Staff themselves were described as being “*so much part of the community*” (Anne, Staff) and embedded in the community, which contributed to this strong support network:

*Our local councillor died quite suddenly, and the funeral was last week. And there was, it was just full, the church and everything was full. And everybody knew Sarah, knew Monica you know, I just felt overwhelmed with the fact that their presence in the community is so important. (Anne, Staff)*

### Social Activities

The observations underscored the significance of social activities and fostered a sense of community and comfort in the space and “*relieves of a lot of stress*” (Alexandra)

During our observations, we noted that there were usually 3-4 children attending with their parents. They used the computer, engaged in drawing, and participated in the social activities.

*It’s good to come here like I say. My kid can play as well here, he likes to come, it’s enjoyable. (Jasmine)*

However, while the Warm Space was open to children, not everyone chose to bring their children along. As Alexandra explained, it also served as a place where there parents were able to take time out for themselves:

*So I leave him with the kids at home, leave all the kids with my husband at home. And I do their tea before I come, and then I come here and get a bit of a break from them. [...] it’s a bit of free time for myself to be honest. Get out the house. And it’s good in the community, because there’s not a lot of places do do things like this. (Alexandra)*

Attendees mentioned that they particularly enjoyed sessions when raffles or tombola were organised. The Warm Space also organised a weekly bingo session which was very popular. (1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10,11)

*I mean when the bingo comes to an end, I think that’s going to be, it’s going to affect quite a lot of people to be honest with you. (Alexandra)*

Some attendees attended English (4), Computer and IT (4), Sewing, Maths (7) and Wellbeing classes (3) alongside the warm space.

The importance of these activities was raised when we asked attendees what they would like to see more of in their community. A very common response was that they wished to see more places like St. Ann's, and more activities. Activities mentioned included craft clubs, after school activities, wellbeing and counselling services, and particularly more activities for adults.

### Social Space

One reason for the success of the Warm Space at St. Ann's Advice Centre was that it was a place *“where people can just come” (John)*, *“... really feel welcome to friendly chatting” (Lisa)* and where *“the atmosphere's nice” (Aoife)*.

Staff and attendees highlighted that there are limited spaces residents can go to, *“feel comfortable, stay all day, even if you just drink a cup of tea? Nowhere.” (Monica, Staff)*.

Given that St. Ann's lacks a town centre, a marketplace, or even a supermarket, staff emphasised how the Warm Space has evolved into a central hub for people to engage with each other. It became a place, where people can visit in the evening, and enjoy themselves without straining their budgets. The lack of such a space and the importance of it was repeatedly highlighted by staff:

*Obviously, St Ann's, so where we are, is at the heart of chase, so like you can see you've got all your shop units which are closed. So literally as soon as it becomes dark, it's very dark and looks deserted, so having, to just then get... generally there's nowhere to go in the evenings locally (Monica, Staff)*

*People were cautious to come out cause it's quite, you know, poorly lit and everything but just having somewhere to go, it's sort of almost within St. Ann's and just like everything shuts down at 5-5:30, then people go into their houses, there's no pubs, there's no social clubs or you know what I mean? (Sarah, Staff)*

*I think, you know sometimes, you don't want to be sat at home do you. But if you go into anywhere in town, if you have a cup of tea, A, it costs minimum £1.50, and once you've drank your tea, you basically, you feel that you've got to leave don't you? And that's what it's all about at the end of the day. We you know, we want people to come and stay all day (Monica, Staff)*

Participants repeatedly said that they wished *“there were more hubs like this and in other areas. [...] And I haven't seen any of them (Jasmine)”*, that they *“didn't believe it [...] Because you don't find somewhere that's you can go and keep warm and socialise for free. (Sophie)”* and that *“there's not another service (Alexandra)”*

Our interviews with staff, highlighted the value of St Ann's as the location of the warm space. They emphasised how being from the community and having gone through similar life experience has made them relatable and opens the space up to other people who are struggling. They gave evidence of how the Warm Spaces provided a new community spirit to the area that they were *“kind of losing” (Monica)* with the pandemic.

*So whereas maybe you know, you saw the individual walking by, and you might nod and say good morning, now they become friends, so you know, they help each other. One if the ladies took another lady down to have a blood test because she's on her own you know, pensioner etc. And that's what it's supposed to be about at the end of the day isn't it, looking out for each other, because a lot of us are on our own. (Monica, Staff)*

The Warm Space successfully created a space and community where people could share their experiences, seek help and support, but also forget about their struggles for a moment and create meaningful friendships.

*Everybody helped everybody else. And it's always been the same round this area. (Sophie)*

*When you come down here, you're all here for the same thing you know, and everybody just talks to you the same way, they don't... (Aoife)*

The importance of such a social space became particularly apparent when in the last weeks the warm space operated. According to **Monica**, people we're “*still staying till the last minute*” and she saw their “*morale's gone down a little bit with the group because they got used to coming out.*”

Although the Warm Space was initially intended to serve as a temporary provision, at the end of our fieldwork activities, everyone we interviewed expressed a strong desire to see the Warm Space continue and to provide a space for the community.

## 4. Conclusion

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*There's that need of helping people reduce the cost, but there's also need of bringing communities together and they're getting all of that other emotional, physical support. (Sarah, Staff)*

St. Ann's Warm Space is one of many warm spaces that have been set up in winter 2022/3 throughout the UK. We found that it served as an example of good practice, providing evidence of a community responding to the manifold difficulties the cost-of living and energy crisis has created.

We found that the warm space created a largely non-stigmatised social space which was open and accessible for everyone across all ages, gender, ethnicities and disabilities. We felt it empowered attendees in times when they felt limited agency to overcome the challenges of fuel poverty, food insecurity and social isolation. The Warm Space bridged connections between attendees and created a community that was supportive and helpful in difficult times.

While people initially came to the Warm Space and St Ann's Advice centre for warmth, food, and advice, its impact reached beyond these basic needs. Attendees stayed on because they made new friends and encountered others who went through similar life experiences.

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