



# Safe and welcoming “warm hubs”: Building social connections and inclusion in Welsh communities

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## ABSTRACT

This article is based on research into the development of “warm hubs” in one Welsh city where community organizations and public buildings offered a warm place to access refreshments, food and local support. These hubs (also described as “warm spaces”) aimed to provide a “safe, warm and welcoming” universal offer to all residents. Drawing on qualitative data from those visiting and coordinating the hubs, the research found evidence which suggests the warm hubs largely met their intended aims. The roll out of the scheme was found to be beneficial in responding to the cost-of-living crisis in post-COVID Wales, but it also contributed to the safety and well-being of communities. A key finding was that the hubs were perceived to have broader societal benefits in developing social connections, promoting inclusivity and reducing social isolation. Warm hubs also promoted digital inclusion, although older attendees preferred face-to-face connections. Further research could consider the role of warm hubs within broader, longer-term strategies for addressing inequalities in communities.

**Key Words** Social inclusion; poverty; community resilience; digital inclusion; social connectivity.

## INTRODUCTION

The societal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including social distancing measures, have had a lasting impact on well-being, including social interaction and isolation, as well as reducing access to services (Dahlgren & Whitehead, 2021; Green et al., 2022). Within Wales, certain population groups have been particularly impacted, including socially deprived communities, older people and those on low incomes (Green et al., 2022). In response, public services, including the police and local government workers, are increasingly employing a public health trauma-informed and preventative approach to helping communities (Jones, 2020; Snowdon et al., 2020).

In autumn 2022, Wales’s First Minister highlighted a “cost-of-living crisis” as a consequence of rising inflation and increasing food and energy costs (Senedd, 2022). This crisis was considered particularly acute for low earners, who were expected to be three times worse off than high-income earners (Handscorn & Marshall, 2022). These ongoing challenges have uncovered not only food inequalities but also the capacity of Welsh communities to work together at

a grassroots level to find innovative responses (Jones et al., 2022). The socially innovative scheme presented in this article is based on research into the promising influence of “warm hubs” in one Welsh city, where community organizations and public buildings offered refreshments, food, local support and shelter from the cold.

In the aftermath of social distancing, “warm hubs” (also known as “warm banks” or “warm spaces”) have brought people together to help alleviate issues caused by the pandemic as well as provide a space for those affected by the ensuing cost-of-living crisis (Cotton, 2021; Ellingham & Foster, 2022). Expanding across the UK, as well as other parts of Europe, warm hubs opened so “people who cannot afford the costs of heating their home during the day can go and interact with other people in the community while staying warm” (van Hoof, 2023, p. 3). Within Wales, the First Minister noted the increasing use of warm hubs as a community-engaged solution, “where community councils, faith groups, sports clubs, community centres are having to plan to prevent people from facing extreme fuel poverty this winter” (Senedd, 2022).

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Subsequently, in winter 2022, the Welsh Government committed £1 million in funding for warm hubs across Wales, stating that they should be “open and inclusive,” responding to “local and cultural needs” (Welsh Government, 2022). Such considerations are relevant, as despite food poverty affecting a wide range of people, visitors to community venues (such as foodbanks) have experienced feelings of stigma and shame (Purdam et al., 2016). Despite this, the COVID-19 response demonstrated the potential for community-engaged solutions in difficult circumstances. Indeed, community groups have found to be “adjusting their activities and scope of action to current needs and challenges” (Mao et al., 2021). Therefore, the emerging establishment of warm hubs offered an important opportunity to conduct an exploratory study into one developing community scheme.

## EXAMINING A WARM HUBS SCHEME

The scheme studied and presented in this article was introduced in late 2022, where 80 warm hubs were established in a variety of community spaces in one Welsh city, from community centres to church halls, voluntary sector buildings and public libraries. Hubs had varying opening hours which were promoted via an online directory. The research set out to examine if the warm hubs were “safe, warm and welcoming” as they had been advertised, as well as understand why people used warm hubs and their wider benefits. A qualitative research study was conducted between March and July 2023 with ethical approval. Carrying out qualitative research requires flexibility and is best conducted in a natural setting (Wincup, 2017). Therefore, focus groups (five) and interviews (seven) primarily took place at the warm hubs. In total, 38 people were spoken with, including coordinators (including librarians), volunteers and attendees, a range of demographics (see Table I). This sample was representative of just over a quarter of the warm hubs within the scheme.

These findings were strengthened by anonymized questionnaire feedback from 63 coordinators (representing over three-quarters of the warm hubs), which was gathered by the

local government team coordinating the scheme. Responses were provided to key questions including the difference, if any, made by the scheme to organization and individuals, any unintended outcomes and any partnership working. However, it is acknowledged that criticisms or negative aspects shared by participants may be limited given that the local government funded the scheme. These qualitative responses, together with the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews, were subject to thematic analysis using a six-phase approach from coding to defining themes to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Warm Hub Themes

### *Warm hubs responding to poverty*

Study participants described the importance of warm hubs in response to the cost-of-living crisis in a post-COVID world. One participant suggested “some people won’t come out since covid” and another stated people are “struggling to pay their bills.” Warm hubs were seen to provide relief for those experiencing poverty and isolation:

“Now that I am claiming benefits, I don’t hardly leave my house or do anything, so it’s nice to come somewhere.” (Int2 participant)

“You didn’t need to put your heating on all day, and it was the company... Otherwise, you sit at home, you’re on your own.” (FG3 participant)

All the venues visited provided free or low-cost refreshments which were appreciated by the participants:

“A lady came in and said she couldn’t afford to pay for a coffee.” (FG4 participant)

“[Because of] the cost-of-living we were struggling, and it was nice to come and have a soup and a bread roll.” (Int6 participant)

**TABLE I** Focus group and interview participant sample overview

Designation	Label	Area	Number of Participants	Description
Focus group 1	FG1	West of city	5	Hub attendees – primarily retired/older people. Mixed gender.
Focus group 2	FG2	West of city	6	Hub attendees – primarily retired/older people. Mixed gender.
Focus group 3	FG3	East of city	7	Hub attendees and volunteers – primarily retired/older people. Mixed gender.
Focus group 4	FG4	Cross-City	3	Hub coordinators. Working age adults. Females.
Focus group 5	FG5	Rural	7	Hub attendees. Primarily retired/older people. Females.
Interview 1	Int1	City centre	1	Hub coordinator. Working age adult. Male.
Interview 2	Int2	City centre	1	Hub attendee. Working age adult. Male.
Interview 3	Int3	City centre	1	Hub attendee. Working age adult. Male.
Interview 4	Int4	West of city	2	Hub volunteers. Retired male and female.
Interview 5	Int5	East of city	1	Hub attendee and volunteer. Retired female.
Interview 6	Int6	Rural	2	Hub attendees. Working age male and female.
Interview 7	Int7	Rural	2	Hub volunteers. Retired females.

The positive impact of this hospitality was recognized; one participant said, “there’s a difference between living and existing,” and another echoed this – “you can have tea and toast here. That immediately makes you feel at ease.”

At least a quarter of warm hubs also responded to digital poverty. One coordinator explained – “we give out free sim cards,” and another said, “people can come and use our broadband for free and our computers for free.”

### *Warm hubs as safe and inclusive spaces*

Around 40% of questionnaire comments suggested that warm hubs were a place of safety, primarily in the context of inclusivity. This was reinforced through discussions with scheme coordinators:

“Whatever people’s background, circumstances, age, protective characteristics ... they can come in and they can have a conversation.” (Int1 participant)

“We’re a place where people feel they can go in without judgement ... we are a safe space for minority groups as well.” (FG4 participant)

Inclusive approaches were appreciated by those visiting the spaces; participants said – “this place is good because its open to all,” “there’s all different people” and “all ages here.” This promoted a safe atmosphere; as one participant explained, “you can sit anywhere ... everyone is gentle.” Another said – “it’s a place where they trust the staff and they feel safe in the environment.” Participants mentioned that community leaders visit; seeing councilors, police community support officers (PCSO) and local area coordinators enabled them to raise issues. As one participant said:

“It feels very safe here ... the PCSO visits regularly. That’s important. We have a chat about any concerns.” (FG2 participant)

The accessibility of warm hubs for people with disabilities was also emphasized:

“I am agoraphobic and am frightened to go out of my house. But I like coming here.” (FG5 participant)

“I’m suffering with my mental health at the moment so I’m trying to get out and do things.” (Int2 participant)

“My daughter has learning disabilities and places like this help.” (FG2 participant)

However, there remain some unknowns in terms of people choosing not to visit the hubs. Eleven schemes noted some issues with lack of attendance or non-attendance with this possibly being related to the issue of stigma of accessing the hubs. This was suggested by eight warm hub coordinators, with one saying, “[We] have learnt that there are a lot of people out there in need of help. They are reluctant to come forward as they feel ashamed of the situation they are in.”

### *Welcoming warm hubs that increase social inclusion*

One of the most significant findings was the impact of warm hubs on building social connections and reducing isolation. This was reflected in over 90% of questionnaire comments about the perceived difference between individuals and the most expressed unintended consequence of the scheme:

“The main unintended outcome was that it was connection and community that people hungered for more than warmth itself!” (Questionnaire comment)

“I really was not expecting this funding to bring the community together as much as it has.” (Questionnaire comment)

This was also reflected across the focus groups and interviews:

“It’s not about the coffee. It’s about engaging with people in the community” (Int4 participant)

This was particularly important for the older participants who lived alone. It enabled them to build local connections, with one participant remarking that it was “the only time [they saw] people” and another indicating that despite living in the same community, they “didn’t really know each other before.”

Furthermore, 27% of questionnaire comments suggested that through the connections, the spaces helped improve the well-being of individuals. One participant explained that her mother had become less withdrawn and “more chatty since coming.”

### *Warm hubs as informal learning spaces*

Warm hubs also act as spaces where people can access information and learn (noted in over 40% of questionnaire comments). Over two-thirds of warm hubs worked with community partners. Finding out what is on locally was vital to residents who were not digitally connected:

“There’s an assumption everyone’s computer literate.”

“I came for company and for information ... to know what’s going on.”

While there was no requirement to provide activities, all the hubs visited appeared to have something to offer. One participant described the warm hubs as a “much bigger experience” than their original purpose. The activities described by participants varied, such as “flower arranging, art, yoga, talks,” “music workshops” and “a community garden,” and many targeted well-being and “mindfulness.” Warm hub coordinators (within one focus group and one interview) stated that skill-based sessions (such as digital skills) were also offered.

### *Reflections on the Potential of Warm Hub Schemes*

Themes from the study were subsequently transformed into an animation which was shared at a community engagement event in July 2023. Indeed, it has been suggested that researchers need to explore new ways of engaging with a

wider audience and creating impact through story telling (Czaran et al., 2017). The event discussions have helped to shape the reflections on the potential of warm hubs as a community-led innovation.

### *Socially inclusive community spaces reduce the impact of poverty*

Communities across Wales opened over 700 warm hubs in winter 2022 (Thomas, 2023), and it is thought over 4,200 warm spaces were provided across the UK (Butler, 2023). The total number of beneficiaries within this study is unknown, as the footfall was not calculated. However, it is suggested that more than half a million people or even more have accessed such spaces in the UK (Butler, 2023). Most people within the research saw the benefits of coming together to keep warm and weather the challenges; as one participant acknowledged, “the pandemic ... heating and energy poverty, the war in Ukraine, Brexit ... have had an impact” on communities. Indeed, it has been argued that “crisis events can stimulate innovative community action, build community and social capacity” (Jones et al., 2022, p. 19). Notably, the impetus for warm hubs came from communities and civil society leaders themselves (WCVA, 2022). Libraries and community information services are also taking a lead role (CILIP, 2022). However, the extent to which warm hubs can be expected to ameliorate a cost-of-living crisis can only be limited. Particular issues exist in Wales, such as the disproportionate amount of poorly insulated homes and number of people living in fuel poverty (NEA, 2023). Poverty requires long-term solutions, and Welsh Government’s responsive strategies, such as a “warm homes” programme aligned with the Well-being of Future Generations Act goals (Corbyn & Baxter, 2021), are yet to be fully realized.

As well as responding to poverty, the most significant finding of the study was the benefits of warm hubs of building social connections and reducing isolation. Notably, a UK survey also found that the greatest impact of warm hubs was “providing a sense of community and tackling loneliness in a safe and welcoming space” (Butler, 2023). There is a sense from the research that, despite some concerns from a small number of coordinators, the spaces do not create the same level of stigma found in visiting foodbanks, for example (see Purdam et al., 2016). It could be that the wider need created by the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis has reduced stigma. Glass et al. (2021) have suggested that the pandemic enabled people to seek help “more easily” than previously, as the “nature of the crisis absolved recipients of blame.” Furthermore, the “impact of the pandemic may be to shift perceptions of stigma ... making people more open to support of one kind or another in the future” (Glass et al., 2021, p. 17).

Indeed, this study mirrored an earlier Welsh study which found “hidden capacity,” “empathy” and a “sense of togetherness” in generating community support (Jones et al., 2022). Moreover, this research found that inclusivity and being non-judgemental were key aspects of providing a sense of safety at the spaces. Notably, this extended to greater opportunities for informal community police engagement, which may have the potential to build trust in police within deprived and high-crime neighbourhoods (Mehmi et al., 2021).

However, there remains concern that there are people in need who are not accessing warm hubs. This was emphasized

by several coordinators and reinforced at the community event to discuss this study and ongoing learning from the warm hubs. While there may be opportunities to examine this, the current lack of quantitative data on footfall will limit the ability to analyze patterns of attendance. Despite this, there are examples of UK cities addressing community engagement, such as using a “warm spaces” charter to promote “dignity and respect” (Gateshead Council, 2023). While Price et al. (2023) have used geospatial approaches to map bus and walking routes to warm hubs which may highlight gaps in accessibility.

### *The big divide: Is digital the solution to reduce social isolation?*

Social networks can play a key role in addressing community inequalities (Marmot, 2010). The findings in this study showed the benefits of connecting people to reduce social isolation and as an extension of this, contribute to improvements in well-being. While there was consensus around warm hubs improving social inclusion, when it came to digital inclusion, there were a range of views suggesting a need to take a more intersectional approach. Digital inequality has been described as a public health challenge in Wales related to “social deprivation, an ageing population and poor broadband connectivity in remote rural areas” (Gann, 2019, p. 146). This so-called “digital divide” was heightened during the pandemic; however, the cost-of-living crisis has stilted digital connection improvement plans (Welsh Government, 2023).

Digital connections were perceived to be important within the warm hubs which have a broader age demographic of visitors. Hubs promote digital inclusion by offering free pre-loaded SIM cards, the use of WiFi and computers and digital skills classes. Indeed, the need to respond to digital inequality is likely to continue to be an issue, for example, with increasing UK broadband prices (Beckett, 2023). A consumer survey suggested that people adjust spending on essentials such as food and clothing to afford telecom services (Which, 2022). Given modern society’s reliance on the internet, it has even been argued that access should be a human right (Nathaniel-Ayodele, 2023).

In contrast, for many older participants, digital access was not a concern, and they were more interested in face-to-face connections and sharing local information. While Wales’ digital strategy aims to ensure “no one is left behind,” it does accept that there are people who “cannot, or decide not to, participate digitally” (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 20). Limited evaluation exists on the impact of technology to address issues such as loneliness and social isolation for older people. One study found some benefits, but this “did not replace or reproduce the value of face-to-face contact” (Barnett et al., 2022, p. 4). Indeed, Roberts and Windle (2020) found rising levels of loneliness and social isolation among older people in North Wales. Their findings emphasized the importance of developing individualized interventions that support community integration. Certainly, the Welsh digital strategy accepts that “user-centred design” should help explore alternative ways to access services (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 20).

“Local area coordination” is one person-centred approach (where coordinators match individuals with community activities) with a strong evidence base, including in

relation to tackling isolation (Roderick et al., 2016). However, its impact on the wider community is less understood (Lunt et al., 2021). Therefore, to respond to intersectional needs around social inclusion and community benefits, this study suggests we may look towards libraries. Libraries played a key role in the development of warm hubs (CILIP, 2022), and their social value in addressing both social and digital inclusion has been acknowledged (Senedd Commission, 2023b). Moreover, they appear to cross the digital and social divide by providing digital and social connectivity to a broad demographic.

## CONCLUSION

The rise in “warm hubs” in Wales was community-driven but government-supported during a cost-of-living crisis. Wales’s community leaders have emphasized that poverty can be ameliorated by community-led initiatives such as warm hubs (Senedd Commission, 2023a, p. 11). This exploratory study has found that evidence which suggests the warm hubs largely met their intended aims – to be safe, warm and welcoming – as well as having broader societal benefits and relevance to the field of community safety and well-being. Firstly, participants found warm hubs to be safe and inclusive spaces where they felt comfortable speaking to the police about community concerns – an important alternative to digital solutions. Secondly, and most significantly, hubs have a well-being role by helping to bring people together (and keep warm), build social connections and reduce isolation.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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