

Supporting Residents During the Cost of Living Crisis – Warm Spaces

1. Purpose of Report

To inform the Scrutiny Board about arrangements for providing warm spaces across the borough this winter.

2. Definition of Warm Space

A warm space is a communal, public and safe space that residents can go to this winter. The call for warm spaces (sometimes called warm hubs or warm banks) originally came from campaigners to mitigate the cost of living crisis. The call for such spaces has been responded to by many local authorities. Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Southend, Sheffield, Bristol and councils in Nottinghamshire are just a few of those setting up warm spaces.

The cost of living crisis was exacerbated in October when energy bills were expected to reach up to £3,500 per year on average per household. The Government then announced a £2,500 pa cap over the next 2 years. The cap has subsequently been changed to run until March 2023. The net result of high rates of inflation and rising costs means many households are and will experience significant hardship, especially those on low incomes.

Warm spaces are existing spaces, generally in council ownership or run by voluntary and community sector partners, where people can go during set opening times, be welcomed and able to stay for up to a few hours. The purpose is to enable people to stay warm. The spaces have staff on site and a warm drink is on offer. Staff will be able to signpost to sources of help e.g. welfare rights service, foodbanks and Adult Social Care for safeguarding concerns. It may be possible to arrange foodbank distribution to some spaces.

The target group is people who are struggling to keep warm in their own home and are likely to be vulnerable e.g. due to isolation, lack of a family/friendship network, disability or being an older person.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has pointed out that warm spaces should not be a substitute for helping people access any resources that enable them to heat their own home. We will continue to provide welfare rights advice as will partner advice agencies in Sandwell to ensure people are able to access their benefit entitlements. The Cost of Living and Resilient Residents pages on the council website publicise the wider range of services and financial assistance available to people. However, it is widely acknowledged that even with these sources of help many of our residents will struggle to keep their home at the minimum temperature of 18 degrees celsius necessary to maintain health.

3. Sandwell's Warm Spaces

Sandwell's warm spaces 'charter' states :

- You will receive a warm welcome every time you come to our Warm Space
- You will be treated fairly and with dignity and respect at our Warm Space
- You will be in a safe space and we will adhere to safeguarding policies at our Warm Space
- We will not tell anyone about your need for a Warm Space, but we are here to listen to any of your concerns
- Every Warm Space will be a non-judgemental place.

A warm space offers :

- Free, hot drinks
- Staff able to advise on basic queries
- Wifi/digital access in some settings
- Other positive activities where possible

The warm spaces that have been launched are:

- 19 libraries (3 of which are in community centres) – various opening hours
- 3 community centres – various opening hours
- 7 leisure centres – Sundays only

In addition to these 29 warm spaces Public Health is working with the voluntary and community sector and faith organisations to support many to become warm spaces. There is a strong commitment from SCVO and the sector, with many organisations already offering welfare based services. Public Health have identified a grants budget to support groups to open their doors.

4. Preparation for Launch

Publicity went out week commencing 17th October to let the public know about the 29 warm spaces. Detailed information is included in the Sandwell Herald which will be delivered to homes in early November.

Staff working in warm spaces have been provided with a briefing document and Frequently Asked Questions to ensure they are equipped with a wide range of helpful information and signposting links.

Basic monitoring will be carried out by staff to measure uptake and the type of help that residents are seeking.