

Community connections in Swansea Spaces



Title: Community Connections in Swansea Spaces: a qualitative research study into the Swansea Spaces scheme

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Executive Summary

This research study explored the development of 'warm hubs' through the 'Swansea Spaces' scheme in Winter 2022/23, where community organisations and public spaces opened their doors to offer a warm place to sit, hot drink and local support. Drawing on qualitative data (focus groups and interviews (38 participants) and questionnaire comments (63 participants)), the research considered the potential wider benefits of the scheme in developing social connections and strengthening communities.

Swansea Spaces were promoted as 'safe, warm and welcoming' spaces. The research found three broad themes aligned with the purpose of the spaces. This includes the benefit of a warm space during cost-of-living challenges; feelings of safety, especially in the context of inclusivity; and a welcoming environment which promotes social connections. A fourth theme was found to be Swansea Spaces as learning spaces with a broader social function for connecting communities through information sharing and activities.

Welcoming spaces

Whilst the spaces were primarily set up as 'warm hubs', one of the **most significant findings was the impact of Swansea Spaces on building social connections and reducing isolation**. This was expressed throughout the focus groups and interviews and reflected in over **90% of questionnaire comments about the perceived difference made to individuals of the scheme**. In addition, **27% of questionnaire comments suggested there had been improved well-being to individuals** by attending the spaces.

Other key findings from the data include:

- *Warm spaces* - **All focus groups and interviews, plus around two thirds of the questionnaire comments referenced the benefit of warm spaces**, particularly within the context of financial challenges. The schemes were able to offer extended or enhanced services to those who needed it (30% of questionnaire comments).
- *Safe spaces* - Swansea Spaces were seen as safe and inclusive spaces. Participants described them as friendly, non-judgemental, accessible and trusted places. Around **40% of comments from coordinators reflected perspectives of safety, particularly in the context of inclusivity**.
- *Learning spaces* – All spaces involved in the focus groups provided opportunities for activities and local information sharing. Spaces were conscious of digital inclusion needs. **Over 40% of comments from coordinators suggested benefits in terms of learning and information sharing. 43 out of 63 (68%) Swansea Spaces said they had engaged in partnership working as part of the scheme**. 13% reported benefits in terms of skills and volunteering development.

A community event was held to discuss the findings and it was felt that whilst the scheme was overwhelmingly positive (and many are carrying on despite funding ending), there was more research needed to understand more about why people do not attend Swansea Spaces who may need it and responsive strategies; explore how Swansea Spaces could develop as a place-based approach and provide a greater level of appropriate support and advice.

Introduction

Overview

This research study considers a community initiative introduced to respond to the cost-of-living crisis and energy poverty in a post-Covid Wales during Winter 2022/23. It explores the development of 'warm hubs' through the 'Swansea Spaces' scheme, where community organisations and public spaces opened their doors to offer a warm place to sit, hot drink and local support. It considers the potential wider benefits of the scheme in developing social connections and strengthening communities.

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a lasting impact on communities – economically, on social interaction and isolation, emotional well-being as well as reducing access to services (Green et al, 2022; Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021). Certain population groups in Wales have been particularly impacted, including disadvantaged communities, older people and those on low incomes (Green et al, 2022). Furthermore, it has been suggested Covid may have caused more damage to communities in the UK due to austerity policies (Williams & McKee, 2023). In Autumn 2022, the First Minister highlighted in the Senedd the worrying economic situation; a cost-of-living crisis, including rising inflation, and increasing food and energy costs. Analysis by the Resolution Foundation highlighted that low earners were expected to be three-times worse off than high-income earners (Handscorn & Marshall, 2022). The First Minister noted the increasing use of 'warm banks' (also known as 'warm hubs or spaces') as a community response to energy poverty:

'Places where people can come to stay warm this winter...it's very difficult to believe that we have reached the point where community councils, faith groups, sports clubs, community centres are having to plan to prevent people from facing extreme fuel poverty this winter.'¹

Committing to £1m funding for this initiative, a subsequent statement from the Minister for Social Justice described warm hubs as 'places in local communities where people can find a safe, accessible and warm environment during the day to help reduce the cost of heating their own homes' (Welsh Government, 2022). As part of the funding requirement, the Minister stated that the hubs should be 'open and inclusive' and consider 'local and cultural needs', with 'refreshments' offered as a minimum. Schemes were administered via WLGA to local authorities in Wales and £80,000 was awarded to Swansea Council to share amongst community organisations. The 'Swansea Spaces' initiative launched in November 2022 as 'a safe, warm and welcoming space' which may include activities, and refreshments or just a place to sit².

A broader branding of 'Swansea Spaces' was agreed rather than 'warm hubs' to reduce any stigma of engaging in the scheme³. For example, experiences of visitors to foodbanks included feelings of stigma and shame, despite food poverty affecting a wide range of people

¹ <https://record.senedd.wales/Plenary/12974#C444732>

² <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/SwanseaSpacesPR?lang=en>

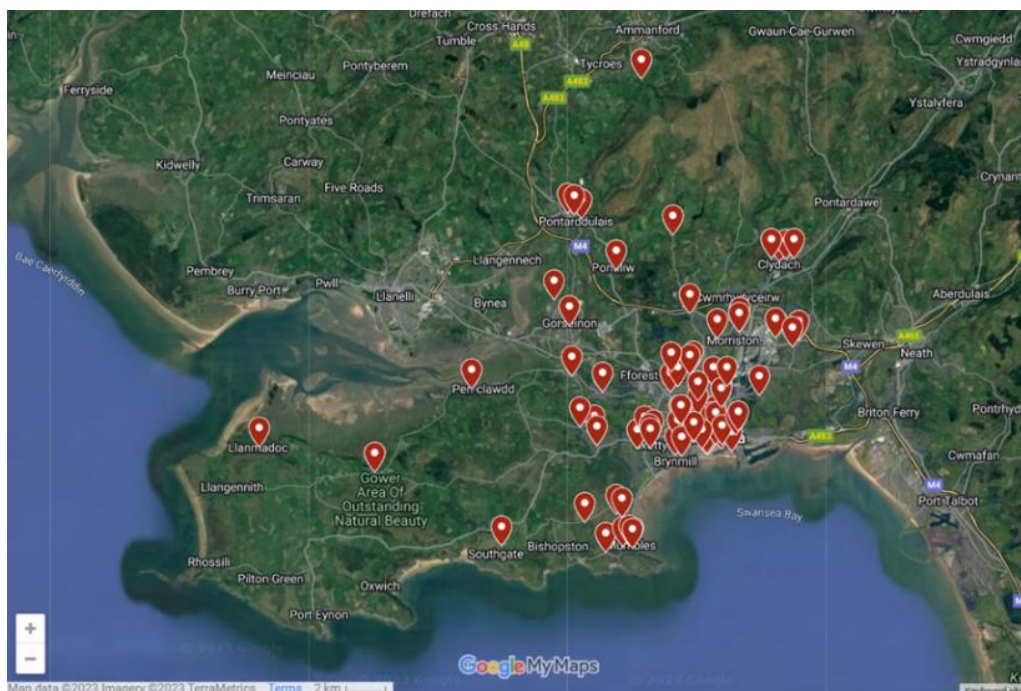
³ An initial research scoping meeting with Swansea Council representatives explained the approach they had taken to implement the scheme

(Purdam et al, 2016). Swansea Spaces are community venues that include charities, churches and community centres, as well as libraries. Around 70 organisations were awarded funding and by March 2023 there were over 80 spaces listed on a dedicated directory and interactive map (see Figure 1) on the council website.⁴ In December 2022, the Welsh Government reported over 300 warm spaces across Wales⁵, with North Wales for example listing 120 on their ‘Croeso Cynnes-Warm Welcome’ scheme. By the end of the scheme, the funding had supported over 700 hubs across Wales (Thomas, 2023).

Research Rationale

In early 2023, the Swansea Council Tackling Poverty Team were receiving positive feedback about the impact of the spaces. It was suggested the scheme may be supporting broader outcomes, such as providing a service for residents who may be isolated or lonely. Indeed, Swansea council has developed strategies around prevention and poverty which include building social capital through social connections (Swansea Council, 2018). Whilst the Welsh Government funding ended in March 2023, most of the spaces continued to provide an offer of support beyond the colder weather and the directory remains. The Leader of Swansea Council remarked that the ‘hubs have turned into community spaces where people are meeting regularly’ and ‘have really taken on a life of their own’ (Thomas, 2023). Therefore, there was an opportunity to conduct research to understand the wider contribution of Swansea Spaces.

Figure 1: Screenshot of map of Swansea Spaces, Swansea Council website - as at 05/04/23



⁴ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/swanseaspaces>

⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-warm-hubs>

Research aims and objectives

This research aimed to understand how the development of Swansea Spaces could help build community connections, considering potential wider benefits beyond its original remit (such as reducing social isolation and increasing community resilience). To achieve the research aims, the project focussed upon the following overarching question - How can Swansea Spaces help to build community resilience and social connections? – and sub questions:

- What are the emerging benefits and limitations of Swansea Spaces?
- What is the role of Swansea Spaces in providing advice, support and signposting to other services?
- How does Swansea Spaces play a part in the wider poverty and prevention agenda ?

Methodology

Research design

A small qualitative study was conducted between March and July 2023 as part of Swansea University's civic mission funded research activity⁶. The study received ethical approval and was conducted in line with Swansea University's Research Integrity policy, including data protection requirements. The research originally centred on conducting focus groups to get a broad understanding about the scheme. Carrying out qualitative research requires flexibility and is best conducted in a natural setting (Wincup, 2017). Therefore, most of the discussions took place at the Swansea Space location and as the research progressed, it was appropriate to hold some interviews to support participation engagement. The findings from focus groups and interviews were further supported by feedback data gathered by Swansea Council for monitoring purposes. Together, these qualitative findings were subject to a thematic analysis using six-phase approach from coding to defining themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Key themes and participant comments from the research were subsequently transformed into an animation which was shared at a community engagement event in July 2023. The discussion and feedback from the event have helped to shape the conclusions and recommendations within this report.

Research methods and sample

Focus groups and interviews

Focus groups were arranged via Swansea Spaces leads who were invited to participate in the research and facilitate a focus group with consenting members. Thank-you gift vouchers for participants were offered as a reasonable incentive. Originally five focus groups were planned to take place in a variety of locations / demographics involving around 6-8 participants. This grew to include seven interviews, reaching five Swansea Spaces, as well

⁶ A small amount of funding was received from the Research Innovation Wales Fund, Higher Education Council for Wales

as libraries involved in the scheme. 38 people were spoken with, including coordinators, volunteers, and attendees (see Table 1). Further informal discussions took place with space leaders and local councillors. Participants were invited to discuss their experiences and views relating to the Swansea Spaces initiative. Most conversations were recorded and transcribed, although some focus groups involved note taking only. The reading and re-reading of the transcripts and notes illuminated four key consistent main themes and four sub-themes (see *Findings*).

Table 1: Focus group and Interview participant sample overview

Designation	Label	Area of Swansea	Participant numbers	Description
Focus group 1	FG1	West	5	Primarily retired/ older people Mixed gender. Swansea Space (SS) attendees.
Focus group 2	FG2	West	6	Primarily retired/ older people Mixed gender. SS attendees.
Focus group 3	FG3	East	7	Primarily retired/ older people Mixed gender. SS attendees and volunteers.
Focus group 4	FG4	Cross-Swansea	3	Working age adults / Females. SS coordinators.
Focus group 5	FG5	Gower	7	Primarily retired/ older people Females. SS attendees.
Interview 1	Int1	Central	1	Working age adult / Male. SS Coordinator.
Interview 2	Int2	Central	1	Working age adult / Male. SS attendee.
Interview 3	Int3	Central	1	Working age adult / Male. SS attendee.
Interview 4	Int4	West	2	Retired male and female. SS volunteers.
Interview 5	Int5	East	1	Retired female. SS attendee and volunteer.
Interview 6	Int6	Gower	2	Working age male and female. SS attendees.
Interview 7	Int7	Gower	2	Retired females. SS volunteers.

Monitoring data (questionnaire)

Additional data was used to triangulate and strengthen the findings from the focus groups and interviews by analysing feedback from monitoring data used by Swansea Council. This consisted of anonymised short comments/responses by 63 Swansea Space Coordinators to key questions, which included:

- What was the difference made [by the initiative] to organisation?
- What was the difference made to individuals?
- Any unintended outcomes/ lessons learned?
- Any partnership working?

This data was initially coded via MS Excel using the themes/sub-themes from the focus group and interview transcripts and further analysed for any additional themes/sub-themes.

Limitations

The focus groups and interviews did not include North Swansea and given the sample size is not representative of all Swansea Spaces. There was a range of age and genders within the sample, and people with disabilities, however the sample was not ethnically diverse. However, the questionnaire data did capture most Swansea Spaces and a wider demographic. Furthermore, discussions within the focus groups and interviews generally reflected on the wider benefits of the spaces beyond the funding period, whereas the questionnaire was more focussed on the impact of the grant.

Findings

Introduction

Swansea Spaces were promoted as ‘safe, warm and welcoming’ spaces. The research did find three broad themes aligned with the purpose of the spaces. This includes the benefit of a warm space during cost-of-living challenges; perspectives of safety, especially in the context of inclusivity; and a welcoming environment which promotes social connections. A fourth theme was found to be Swansea Spaces as learning spaces with a broader social function for connecting communities through information sharing and activities. The themes and subthemes are shown in the table below:

Table 2: Overview of themes found within the research

Theme No.	Main Theme	Sub-themes
1	Warm spaces	Cost-of-living/financial crisis; Poverty; Covid; Hospitality
2	Safe spaces	Inclusivity; Accessibility; Extended services; Trusted
3	Welcoming spaces	Social inclusion; Social connections; Well-being; Partnership working
4	Learning spaces	Activities; Information sharing; Digital inclusion; Skills development; Volunteering

Theme 1 - “A difference between living and existing”: The benefit of a warm space during cost-of-living crisis

Around two thirds of the questionnaire comments referenced the benefits of ‘warm spaces’ – including within the context of financial challenges (see Table 3 & 4 in the appendix). Within the focus groups and interviews, participants described the value of warm spaces in response to the Cost-of-Living crisis but also in a post-covid world. With one saying ‘some people won’t come out since Covid’ and another suggesting ‘covid has changed things’ by losing ‘links’, and regular activities (one mentioned the café she went to had closed and another his gym class had stopped). Recovering from the impact of ‘Covid’ **was referenced in 11% of questionnaire comments about how the scheme assisted the organisation** (Table 3). Participants suggested life had changed in the last few years, although it wasn’t always clear what the reason for the change was. One participant

commented – ‘the pandemic... heating and energy poverty, the war in Ukraine, Brexit, many of these things have had an impact’. Another said:

‘The gap between those who have and those who have not is getting bigger... Those who are struggling to pay their electricity bills. Rents have gone through the roof.’
(FG3 participant)

As a result, it was suggested that Swansea Spaces, sometimes described by participants as ‘warm hubs’, were welcome:

‘That’s what people enjoyed about the warm hub – you didn’t need to put your heating on all day and it was the company for lunch. Otherwise you sit at home, you’re on your own.’ (FG3 participant)

‘We’re a collection point for two foodbanks... And we invited people to stay for coffee and then the warm hub enabled us to invite extra people to stay for lunch as well.’
(FG3 participant)

All the venues visited provided refreshments which were appreciated by focus group participants. A few commented on the cost of going out for a hot drink, saying ‘places for coffee are dear’, and another saying:

‘A lady came in and said she couldn’t afford to pay for a coffee in the coffee shops because they were in excess of 3 pounds.’ (FG4 participant)

A participant involved in coordination of a group suggested tea and coffee was what ‘people most appreciated’. With another recognising the benefit of this hospitality, saying – ‘there’s a difference between living and existing isn’t there’ and another said, as a result, ‘each time... they are walking out with a bit of sunlight’. Further participants explained the importance of the hospitality within the ‘warm hubs’:

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

‘You can have tea and toast here. That immediately makes you feel at ease.’ (Int3 participant)

‘Having these things available i.e. the hot drinks and period products...help hugely.’
(FG4 participant)

Those running the spaces also benefitted from the funding. One stated ‘food has gone so expensive - our electric bills and our gas - have quadrupled’ and another said ‘we were charging a £1... that was the only way we could pay our bills’. Others saying ‘with the additional funding, it opened this [space] up hugely’ and ‘funding for [this scheme] wouldn’t be seen as necessity in some respects...its got a really important place in society.’ **Financial challenges for both individuals and organisations featured within 20% of questionnaire comments around lessons learned from the scheme** (see Table 5 in the appendix).

The spaces also supported wider digital and energy poverty challenges. One participant said: 'Swansea Spaces...all links in to assisting people with financial matters - we've had energy advice...the credit union doing drop-in sessions' and another - 'we also provide supply to charge your mobile phone and we put some leads and extra sockets.' Whilst two of the schemes were actively working to address data poverty

'We give out free sim cards to the people as part of the free data bank to those who haven't got access to the internet...in partnership with good things foundation.' (Int1 participant)

'People can come and use our broadband for free and our computers for free.' (FG4 participant)

Theme 2 - 'Everyone is gentle': Swansea spaces as safe and inclusive spaces

Around 40% of questionnaire comments reflected perspectives of safety - especially in the context of inclusivity (see Table 3 and 4). This was reinforced through the discussions in the interviews with scheme coordinators:

'As an organisation, when we say safe space, we mean that inclusive practice'.
'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)

The coordinators appear to be key to achieving this sense of safety and inclusivity, having an 'open door' policy. which also links to the theme of welcoming spaces:

'We're very much on the grassroots community, anti-poverty, pro-equality, so that should be inclusive of everybody.' (Int1 participant)

'When [people] come particularly for the first time...it can be difficult...So its really important you engage with them...we try and get to the door and say, come on in.' (Int4 participant)

'We've got some teenage boys making it a port of call after school on most days. We don't judge whether they need these drinks... we can have a conversation with them and I think that's a positive.' (FG4 participant)

Many also extended their hours as a result of the scheme. Indeed **30% of questionnaire comments talked about extended or enhanced services and 32% of new (or more) attendees** (Table 3). One participant commented 'churches ...were open every day to help keep people warm'. Inclusive approaches were appreciated by those visiting the spaces, who said: 'this place is good because its open to all', 'its for anyone', 'there's all different people' and 'all ages here'. This creates a positive, welcoming atmosphere and, as one participant said 'the best thing is everyone gets on' and another explained 'you can sit anywhere here. Everyone is gentle. Its like a community'.

This gives people an opportunity to open-up to others in a trusted space. As one said – ‘it’s a place where they trust the staff and they feel safe in the environment’. Participants mentioned that key community figures visit regularly, notably councillors, PCSOs and local area coordinators. This provides them with a comfortable environment to raise local or personal issues:

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

‘The PCSO’s...we get to know them, see that they are human.’ (Int5 participant)

‘Having councillor available is important. We can raise an issue and they will follow it up.’ (FG2 participant)

Swansea Spaces are safe, inclusive – and *accessible* spaces, including for those with disabilities:

‘We’ve got sensory equipment...a hearing loop...reading aids as well...we’re trying to reduce barriers as far as possible.’ (Int1 participant)

‘We want more people to know that libraries are accessible and there for them.’ (FG4 participant)

‘I am agoraphobic and am frightened to go out of my house. But I like coming here. I go to Tesco on the same day and know that if I panic I can come here. It’s the only time I come out.’ (FG5 participant)

‘I’m suffering with my mental health at the moment so I’m trying to get out and do things. I’ve had problems with alcohol. And when I’m not doing anything I will start drinking.’ (Int2 participant)

‘There is a blind lady who comes and everyone is aware and helps her.’ (FG5 participant)

‘My daughter has learning disabilities and places like this help.’ (FG2 participant)

However, there remains some unknowns in terms of people not using the spaces where they may have benefitted from this. **11 schemes noted some issues with lack of attendance**, some of which was thought to be linked to lack of awareness or transport issues (Table 5). One participant (a coordinator) commented:

‘For all the people who come to us... there is probably a 100 in their houses who aren’t mobile...how do we get to the people who aren’t here?’ (Int4 participant)

A few participants explained the importance of public transport:

‘Getting here on the bus is very important. Sometimes the bus doesn’t turn up. And its every hour. We really rely on the bus.’ (FG5 participant)

‘We offer lifts if someone stops driving. Or they’re not able to drive...its important to us that people don’t lose that ability to come here because their old.’ (FG3 participant)

It is understood that at least one scheme used the funding to issue bus tickets.

Another reason for non-engagement may relate to the **issue of stigma** of accessing the warm hubs and facilities, despite the inclusive approach. This was **mentioned by 8 coordinators** (Table 5), 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.'

Theme 3 - 'It's not about the coffee': welcoming spaces helping build social connections and reduce isolation

One of the **most significant findings** is the impact of Swansea Spaces on **building social connections and reducing isolation through a warm welcome**. This was reflected in over **90% of questionnaire comments about the perceived difference to individuals** (Table 4) as well as the **most expressed unintended consequence of the scheme** (Table 5). As two coordinators suggested:

'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 in the focus groups and interviews:

'I think what's the most rewarding thing is... people have come to the coffee morning as strangers and have made new friendships.' (Int4 participant)

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

The importance of the spaces in reducing isolation was consistently expressed by participants: 'about having company', 'getting to know people' 'avoid the isolation' and the spaces have 'expanded our circle' and 'made new connections'. This was particularly important for those living alone, as explained by older participants in focus group one and two:

'Some of us don't have family...or they don't live locally.'

'We live by ourselves. It can be isolating.'

'I would struggle to spend the whole day alone. I am not a TV man.'

'It's the only time I see people.'

It gives the opportunity for local people to build connections with each other, as explained by participants in focus group five:

'We all live locally but didn't really know each other before.'

'We didn't really know each other before even though we live in the same area.'

Especially where their circumstances may have changed:

'My wife died three years ago. This was the first group I started coming to afterwards.' (FG2 participant)

'I became ill and couldn't do stairs so I got a new place. I didn't know anyone. There was a lady who said to come along here and I have been coming ever since.' (FG1 participant)

By being together they can support or check in on one another:

'People feel...they've got someone to turn to. They've got peers that are maybe in a similar situation.' (Int1 participant)

'Give people space and sometimes bonds organically grow. You've got people sitting down reading...they check in with others.' (FG4 participant)

'If people don't come...we ring and ask them [how they are].' (Int4 participant)

Furthermore, **27% of questionnaire comments** suggested that through the connections, the **spaces helped improve well-being of individuals** (Table 4). For example, one participant explained that her mother who was previously withdrawn had become 'more chatty since coming.' (Int5 participant). As well as reducing social isolation, the spaces can help with loneliness:

'My daughter was concerned because I was lonely, she rang around and heard about this group. She encouraged me to come and I have been coming for several months.' (FG1 participant)

Swansea Spaces people - the coordinators - are welcoming. They care about their community. This links to the theme of inclusivity. As coordinators explained:

'The mingling is important. We try to get to know names. If someone comes in that hasn't been before we take them to a table, introduce them.' (Int7 participant)

'The library staff are really part of breaking down that social isolation. We know that people come into libraries and that may be the only person they speak to.' (FG4 participant)

The residents attending spaces recognise this too. As one said – 'the couple who run this are brilliant. They give up their time.' (FG1 participant)

The coordinators also involve other local agencies in their spaces. **43 out of 63 (68%) Swansea Spaces said they had engaged in partnership working as part of the scheme**, with 11% providing comments related to partnership working specifically making a difference to the organisation and individuals. As one scheme coordinator shared within a focus group:

'We were on a map and that helped have more awareness of the other organisations and the valuable work they were doing as well. And we were cross promoting a bit as well. It strengthened partnerships in communities.' (FG4 participant)

There is the question of sustainability of the spaces and the impact of stopping the scheme. **20% of questionnaire comments about lessons learnt discussed the continuation of scheme (and funding)** (Table 5). One focus group participant was concerned that if the group stopped they 'wouldn't see anyone'.

Theme 4 - 'A much bigger experience': communities using informal spaces to share information and learn

A wider benefit of Swansea Spaces which emerged is that they also act as information and learning spaces, with participants sharing local information, engaging in activities and even skills development. **Over 40% of questionnaire comments around the difference made by the scheme concerned the broader theme of learning and information** (Table 3 & 4). Contributions in focus groups one and two reinforce this:

'I came for company and for information...to know what's going on.'

'Word of mouth is important.'

'I found out about this group through the library.'

'It helps me stay in touch with whats going on – especially for families.'

'You get to know what else is going on in the community.'

'If we stopped going then we would lose all the information. It keeps you in the loop.'

Finding out what's on locally via word of mouth is vital to residents who are not digitally connected (as articulated by participants in focus group one and two):

'If your computer literacy is ok then you can find things out.'

'There's an assumption everyone's computer literate.'

'We want to get information in person and have a tea and coffee.'

Participants in focus group five also saw the importance of sharing local community information:

'Any information we have we can pass it on. That's important.'

'I do volunteering too and know about other things going on and can tell people.'

Whilst there is no requirement to get involved in activities in Swansea Spaces, all the spaces visited appeared to have something to offer:

'It's about company, social evenings, we had Christmas lunch, its marvellous.' (FG2 participant)

'We developed what was just tea and coffee into a much bigger experience.' (FG4 participant)

The activities are varied from 'flower arranging, art, yoga, talks', to marking occasions and involving the wider community. One participant mentioned that on 'St David's day we had school children singing'. As participants in focus group three explained:

'The events we do at church...are very much community things and we have expanded.'

'We started a community garden which brings in a local charity and school.'

Some of the activities are targeted around well-being:

'We had health initiatives...pottery painting workshops that offered mindfulness. ...sewing workshops. While they weren't directly from the Swansea spaces grant we tried to coordinate all our activity.' (FG4 participant)

'People express themselves differently. Some people do it through music.' (Int1 participant)

Some spaces also provide skills development and flexible adult learning in a supportive environment. **13% of questionnaire comments around the difference made to organisations** (10% in relation to individuals) **talked about skills and volunteering development** (Table 3 & 4).

'I was previously a university student ...I wasn't able to study with the pain. It is something I can come and do when I am well enough.' (Int2 participant)

'Everybody's really helpful and it's a nice working environment... you can ask about anything. They're approachable.' (Int3 participant)

'It's the skills of the staff to try and make that wall come down.' (Int1 participant)

'Libraries are about enabling people to learn... But it's not always about doing for someone, it's about giving them the skills.' (FG4 participant)

Supporting the development of digital skills (alongside improving digital access, as referred to in the first theme) was important for some organisations:

'They'll start off on maybe a coding course, and then will move to a website development course, then a music course. They like what we are. I think some of that is due to warm hubs as well.' (Int1 participant)

'Digital literacy is always one of our priorities.' (FG4 participant)

Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

This research set out to understand how the development of Swansea Spaces could create wider benefits for the community beyond an initial 'warm hub' offer. This small-scale study has uncovered themes that together show the potential of the activity in helping build community resilience and social connections. This is even more significant given the short-term nature of the funding opportunity and how most spaces have chosen to continue to open their doors beyond the Winter. Swansea spaces have been important for building bonds, friendships, social capital, and resilience through difficult times from the connections developed. Four key themes have emerged from the research - perspectives of safety, especially in the context of inclusivity; the benefit of a warm space during cost-of-living challenges; the welcoming environment which promotes social connections; and learning

spaces which develop communities through information sharing and activities. This discussion draws together these interconnecting themes and takes a more intersectional approach to understanding the perceived impact of the scheme, as well as the wider challenges faced by Swansea Spaces people.

Discussion points

A safe, warm space to weather the 'perfect storm': Social inclusion reducing the impact of poverty

Warm hubs brought, as one participant described a sense of 'sunlight' to people by physical and emotional warmth and hospitality. The cost-of-living crisis, not unlike the Covid-19 pandemic, has uncovered food inequalities, but also the capacity of local communities to work together at a grassroots level to find innovative responses (Jones et al, 2022). After two years of 'social distancing', the concept of 'warm or warmth banks' or 'warm hubs' has grown to support post-pandemic recovery as well as responding to the climate and energy crisis (see for example, Cotton, 2021; Ellingham & Foster, 2022). Opening up across the UK in 2022, warm hubs have been described as places for '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). The concept can be found as far back as 2017 in Northumberland where it has now well established (Community Action Northumberland, 2023; Glass et al, 2021). Moreover, the 'warm welcome campaign' suggests more than half a million people visited their network of over 4,200 warm spaces across the UK last Winter (Butler, 2023).

Swansea Spaces are essentially 'warm hubs' and this research has found the majority of people see the benefits of coming together to keep warm. A participant recognised the challenges culminating in a perfect storm – 'the pandemic... heating and energy poverty, the war in Ukraine, Brexit, many of these things have had an impact' on communities. These challenges adversely affect certain population groups; for example, older people are said to be 'going green out of financial necessity' (van Hoof, 2023). Particular issues exist in Wales, such as the disproportionate amount of poorly insulated homes and numbers of people living in fuel poverty (NEA, 2023). The Welsh Government have introduced various policies to address this, including the Warm Homes Programme and energy efficiency strategy, in line with goals within the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 (Corbyn & Baxter, 2021). However, as noted by the First Minister, the impetus for warm hubs came from communities themselves; a joint statement from WCVA and civil society leaders urged government to provide support to front-line voluntary organisations (WCVA, 2022). Participants described the logic in coming together to share a heated space; as one said 'you didn't need to put your heating on all day and it was the company for lunch.'

'Company', it seems, is key. As well as addressing the poverty challenges, the most significant finding of the study was the impact of Swansea Spaces on building social connections and reducing isolation. Notably, a recent survey on behalf of the Warm Welcome campaign also found the greatest impact of warm hubs was 'providing a sense of

community and tackling loneliness in a safe and welcoming space' (Butler, 2023)⁷. 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. For example, Glass et al (2021) has suggested 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). The Swansea Scheme found that inclusivity and being non-judgemental was a key aspect of providing a sense of safety at the spaces. However, there remains concerns that there are people in need who are not using Swansea Spaces. There is an opportunity to explore ways for spaces to reach out (for example in Northumberland warm hubs have provided food deliveries, Glass et al, 2021) or to look at messaging to reinforce the inclusivity found inside (with one city providing a 'warm spaces charter' which includes that 'everyone in a Warm Space treats people, and is treated by people, with dignity and respect' (Gateshead Council, 2023)).

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

Digital inequality has been described as a public health challenge in Wales particularly surrounding 'digital inclusion, including social deprivation, an ageing population and poor broadband connectivity in remote rural areas' (Gann, 2019, p146). Furthermore, this inequality and so called 'digital divide' was heightened during the covid-19 pandemic where use of technology was seen as essential (Welsh Government, 2023). Whilst there are efforts via Welsh Government 'Digital Strategy for Wales' to improve digital connectivity, it has been acknowledged that the cost-of-living crisis has impacted on improvement plans (Welsh Government, 2023). The findings in this study showed the benefits of connecting people to reduce social isolation, and as an extension to this, improve well-being. Whilst there was consensus around Swansea Spaces improving social inclusion, when it came to digital inclusion, there were a range of views which suggests a need to take a more intersectional approach to understand how digital inclusion supports social connections.

For example, for two of the focus groups which have a broader age demographic visiting their spaces, supporting digital connections is important. Participants described providing services to promote digital inclusion through offering free sim cards, charging points, use of WIFI and computers, plus digital skills classes. This was described as a priority for space coordinators. Engagement with the Good Things Foundation 'national databank' was one way of decreasing the digital divide⁸. Furthermore, the need to respond to digital inequality is likely to continue to be an issue, for example, USwitch suggested that broadband prices are expected to increase by 15% this year⁹. A consumer survey suggested that people adjust spending on essentials such as food and clothing in order to afford telecoms services

⁷ The report containing further details of the survey has not yet been published, but more data can be found on The Guardian Article <https://www.warmwelcome.uk/blog/the-guardian-more-than-500-000-people-in-uk-visited-warm-rooms-during-the-winter>

⁸ <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/databank/>

⁹ Article dated 22/06/23 <https://www.uswitch.com/broadband/guides/mid-contract-price-rises/>

(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 – within the focus groups with many older people, digital was not an important factor and moreover, they were more interested in face-to-face connections and informal sources of information sharing. Whilst the 'Digital Strategy for Wales' aims to promote digital inclusion 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). There is limited formal evaluation on the impact of technology to address issues such as loneliness and social isolation for older people (Barnett et al, 2022). During covid-19, 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). A study in North Wales also looked at rising in loneliness and social isolation alongside an ageing population; findings emphasised the importance of developing individualized interventions that help integrate people into their communities. (Roberts and Windle, 2019). Indeed, the Welsh digital strategy accepts that 'user centred design' should help explore alternative ways access services (Welsh Government, 2021, p.20). Local authority provided Local Area Coordination is one person-centred approach with a strong evidence base in Swansea (Roderick et al, 2016). Some participants highlighted how local area coordinators introduced them to the Swansea Space or visit the space. Indeed tackling isolation has been and continues to be one of the key factors for coordinators (Roderick et al, 2016: Roderick, *forthcoming*¹⁰). Local Area Coordination has been seen to help individuals and families but there is less evidence around the community impact (Lunt et al, 2020) and links into groups such as Swansea Spaces (an area to perhaps explore further).

Finally, to respond to intersectional needs around social inclusion and community benefits, we can also look towards the libraries. Libraries and information services across the UK were amongst the first to promote the use of 'warm hubs' (CILIP, 2022). Participants were positive about the expanded offer in libraries as part of Swansea Spaces. Libraries appear to cross the digital divide in terms of providing both digital and non-digital connectivity to a broad demographic. A recent Senedd report highlighted the social value of libraries (and leisure services) including their role in addressing social and digital inclusion (Senedd Commission 2023b). Notably, in her contribution to the Senedd Committee, the Older People's Commissioner for Wales has also highlighted the importance of libraries as community hubs.¹¹

Concluding remarks

The rise in 'warm hubs' was community driven but supported by the Welsh Government funding and local authority coordination within Swansea. As one participant acknowledged, such funding wouldn't necessarily been 'seen as a priority' ordinarily. However, this research has gone some way to show the wide community benefits of the implementation of Swansea Spaces scheme, which has continued into the summer months. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to put a number on how many people benefitted from the scheme in

¹⁰ An updated research report on Swansea Local Area Coordination is forthcoming from Sian Roderick, Swansea University.

¹¹ <https://olderpeople.wales/local-authority-library-and-leisure-services/>

Swansea¹², but the UK figure has been suggested as more than half a million people or even higher (Butler, 2023). Participants at a recent stakeholder event to discuss the Welsh Government draft budget for 2024-25 highlighted a need to ‘focus on community-led solutions and prevention’ ‘to tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality’; and to achieve this, ‘the importance of universal initiatives’ such as ‘warm hubs’ was noted (Senedd Commission, 2023a, p.11). Indeed, the community event held to discuss the findings of this research indicated the scheme was overwhelmingly positive and should continue, however there was more long-term research needed. This includes understanding why some people do not visit Swansea Spaces and a greater place-based understanding of how the spaces work within their local areas and opportunities for further development of Swansea Spaces.

Recommendations

The community event discussions have helped to shape the following recommendations:

- Share the findings of this research, including through the short accompanying animation, with all relevant organisations to promote the work of Swansea Spaces.
- Conduct further research to develop an understanding of barriers to attending Swansea Spaces, including exploring appropriate strategies to reach these individuals.
- Explore how Swansea Spaces work (or could work) as a place-based approach with public services (such as schools, social services) and other voluntary sector agencies.
- Understanding on how Swansea Spaces can provide a greater level of appropriate support and advice (such as via SNPTCAN¹³ and Local Area Coordination).

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¹² It was not a requirement for spaces to track attendees and Swansea council were reluctant to put an accurate figure on participation numbers

¹³ The Swansea Neath Port Talbot Advice Network <https://snptcan.wales/>

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Appendix

Table 3

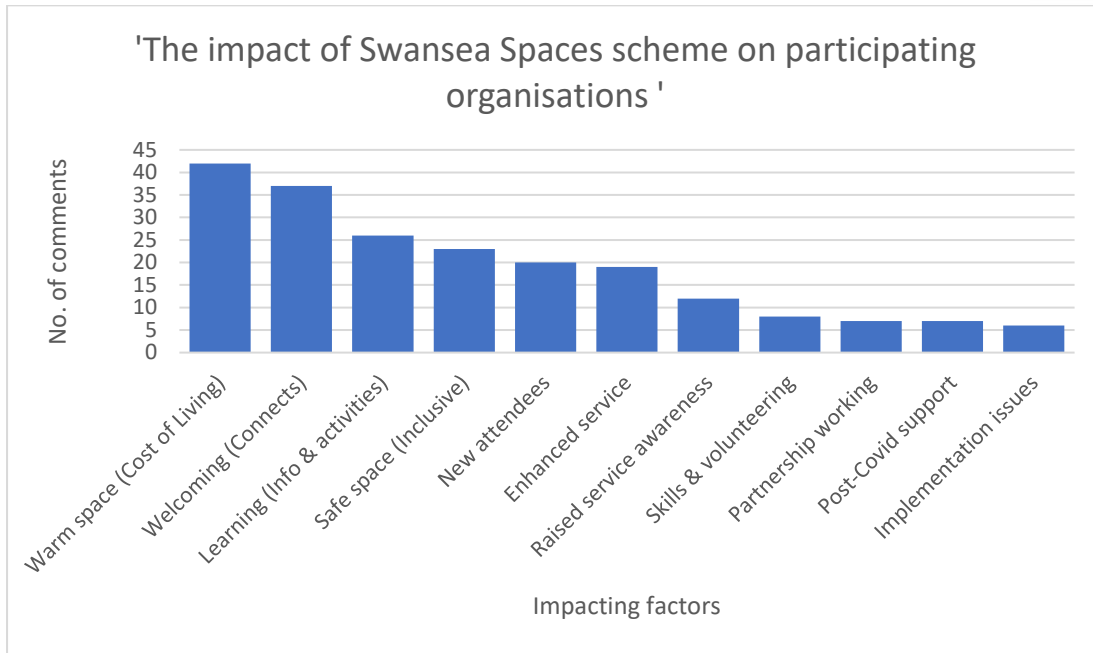


Table 4

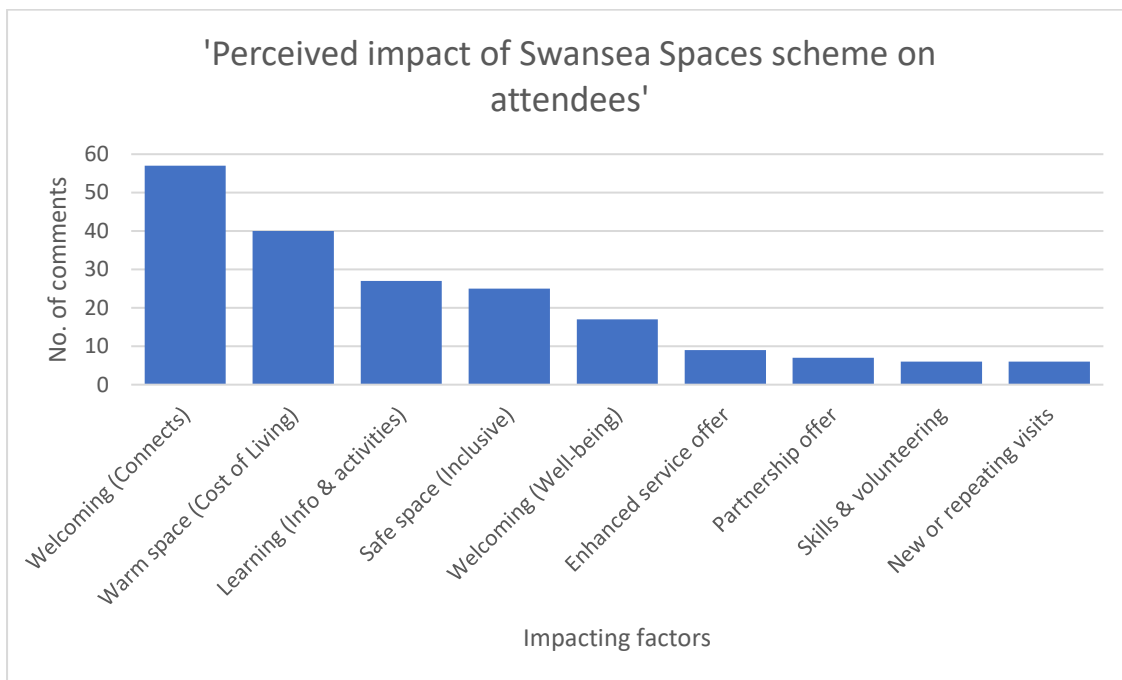


Table 5

