Welcome Spaces

April 2024 to March 2025

point north

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Welcome Spaces

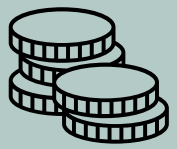
The Welcome Spaces Fund (the Fund) was launched in October 2023 to provide a range of activities and support to local communities. A partnership approach between Durham County Council and Point North created a pot of funding of £329,000 to help voluntary and community groups reach and support County Durham's most vulnerable and isolated residents. The funding included £250,000 of UK Shaped Prosperity funds which helped strengthen capacity and capability in communities in Mission Critical Areas.

With the average grant size of £4,218, the fund's small but crucial awards allowed community groups to open their doors for a few hours a week, while larger grants helped organisations expand their provision. Ultimately, the fund prioritised areas with limited existing resources and communities facing the greatest hardship, including former mining communities in areas such as Easington Colliery, Seaham, Pelton Fell and Stanley, who received 40% of the grants.

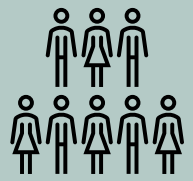
"Since we lost the churches and Salvation Army services, our centre has developed into the drop-in centre for advice and help," shared one of the community centre's in a former mining village.

The fund has offered flexibility and placed trust in community organisations to respond to local needs in ways that made sense for their communities. This empowered groups to deliver a broad range of services including providing hot meals, running social activities, offering advice services, and creating a space where people could gather and feel less alone.

Since their launch, Welcome Spaces have become vital community hubs that are continuing to thrive beyond their initial funding period.



£329,000
Awarded to communities



12,400+
People supported



78
Grants awarded to communities



67
New partnerships formed

Reach across County Durham

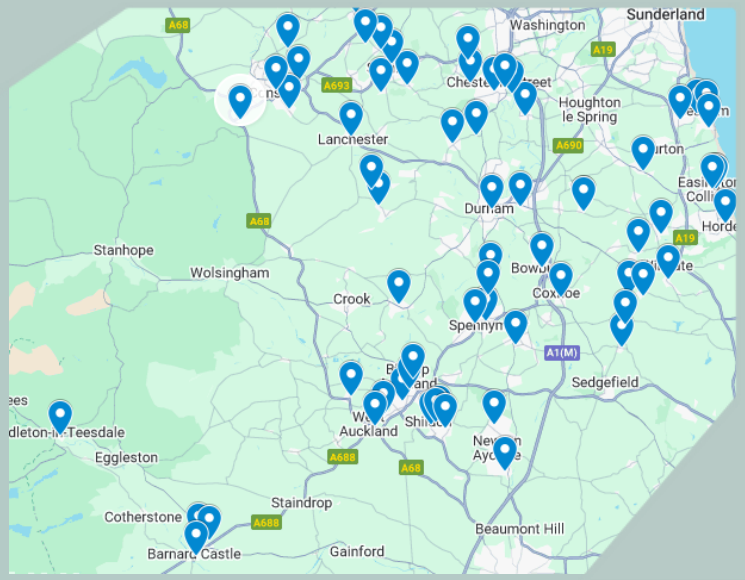
Welcome Spaces are now widely established across County Durham, reaching communities from urban centres to rural villages. They have became lifelines for thousands of people struggling with the cost-of-living crisis.

For many, these spaces provided the only hot meal of the week. For others, they offered the only social contact. For some, they became gateways to recovery, employment, and even community leadership.

89%
In priority areas

23
Groups in rural communities

55
Groups in urban spaces



Map shows communities the fund has supported, and the grants awarded between April 2024 – March 2025

The difference you've made

Welcome Space are places where dignity is restored, where people feel valued, and where communities come together to support one another. They represent the best of community spirit; neighbours helping neighbours through difficult times.

Health & Wellbeing Improvements

The monitoring reports reveal a consistent pattern: people came for practical help but stayed for the human connection.

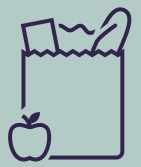
Mental health improvements emerged as the most significant impact, with residents describing sessions as essential for their wellbeing. Several groups partnered with local health services to provide health checks, medication reviews, and wellness activities.

Physical health of residents also improved as a result of many groups offering nutritious meals, exercise classes, and health education.

One group reported that three regular attendees were able to reduce their blood pressure medication after attending weekly exercise sessions at their Welcome Space.



100%
Tackled fuel poverty



83%
Tackled food insecurity



78,000+
Hot meals served



£1.2m
Additional funding secured by groups

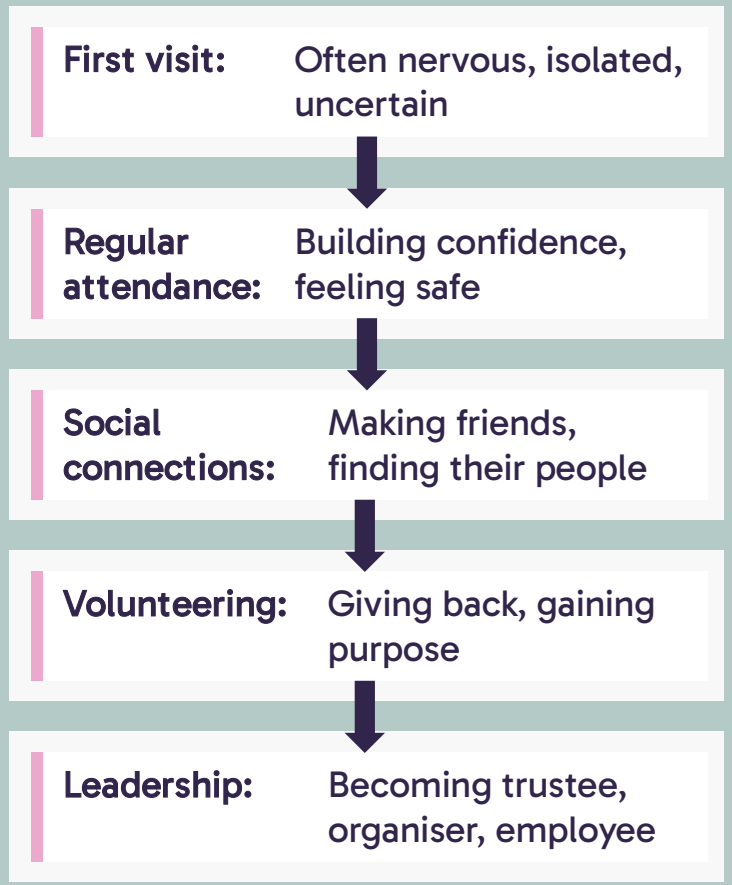
The transformation journey

Stacey's journey

Stacey first came to Coxhoe Village Hall as a Community Pantry beneficiary, struggling financially and socially isolated. She later began volunteering at the Community Pantry, then asked to help with Silver Fun sessions, a Welcome Space offering free activities, carpet bowls, and social connection. This gave Stacey a reason to leave the house and over months, her confidence blossomed. She started managing and planning sessions, setting up rooms, and running activities independently. The Hall's trustees were so impressed they invited her to join the management committee.

Today, Stacey is a trustee of Coxhoe Village Hall, has expanded her friendship group, and regularly meets volunteers socially outside sessions. The Welcome Space didn't just provide warmth and food, it created a pathway from beneficiary to community leader.

For many people access to a community centre for essential support can be the first step into transforming their lives. From Coxhoe's Stacey (pantry user to trustee) to Team Solan's visitor (cancer support to employee), Welcome Spaces are creating pathways for people to turn their lives around.





Volunteer mobilisation

One of the most remarkable outcomes of the fund has been the mobilisation of over 850 volunteers across County Durham. These volunteers come from all walks of life; retired professionals, students, people in recovery, parents, and those who were once attendees themselves.

The volunteer model has created a virtuous cycle: people come for help, find community, and then give back by helping others. This has built resilience not just in individuals but in entire communities.

Volunteers report increased wellbeing, purpose, and social connection, the same benefits that mirror those experienced by attendees.

£680,000
Volunteer time value

34,000
Volunteer hours

850+
Active volunteers

15-20%
Service users went on to become volunteers

Community impact

Sustained Community Connections

Welcome Spaces have become permanent fixtures in their communities, with 94% of funded groups reporting they will continue operations beyond the initial funding period. These spaces have evolved from emergency winter provisions into year-round community hubs.

Regular attendees report forming lasting friendships, with many describing their Welcome Space as 'a second family' or 'the highlight of my week.' The social connections forged during the winter months have proven resilient, with attendance remaining strong even as the weather improves.

Economic Resilience

Beyond immediate cost-of-living relief, Welcome Spaces have helped build long- term financial resilience. Groups report that 67% of regular attendees have accessed additional support services through referrals made at their Welcome Space, including debt advice, benefits guidance, and employment support.

The Welcome Spaces have also become informal job clubs, with volunteers helping attendees with CV writing, job applications, and interview preparation. At least 45 attendees across the funded spaces have secured employment or training opportunities through connections made at their local Welcome Space.

94%
Will continue operations beyond funding period

67%
Of attendees accessed additional support services

45+
Attendees secured employment or training

Challenges overcome

Rising Energy Costs

Many groups faced their own energy cost challenges while trying to provide Welcome Spaces. Creative solutions emerged: sharing venues with other organisations, negotiating bulk energy deals, and maximising natural light and insulation. Several groups reported that the Welcome Spaces funding was crucial in allowing them to keep their doors open when their own energy bills tripled.

Sustainability Beyond Funding

Groups worried about continuing operations after the funding ended. Many developed diverse income streams: small fundraising events, donations from attendees who could afford to contribute, partnerships with local businesses, and applications to other funding sources. The strong community support and demonstrated impact made it easier to secure additional funding. Several groups reported that local businesses and individuals stepped forward to sponsor their Welcome Space once they saw the difference it made.

Volunteer Capacity

The demand for Welcome Spaces often exceeded initial volunteer capacity. Groups responded by recruiting from within their attendee base - people who had been helped by the space became volunteers themselves. This created a virtuous cycle of community support and demonstrated the empowering nature of the spaces. Training and support networks between Welcome Spaces helped share best practices and build volunteer confidence.

Stigma & Awareness

Some people were reluctant to attend, fearing stigma or feeling they were 'taking from those more in need.' Groups addressed this by emphasising the community aspect i.e. spaces for everyone, not just those in crisis. Marketing focused on activities, social connection, and community rather than 'help' or 'support.' This reframing helped attract a broad range of attendees and minimised stigma.

Stories from the community

Margaret's Story: From Isolation to Community Leader

Just before Christmas, Margaret, a widow in her late 70s, joined her local Welcome Space. The loss of her beloved dog had shaken her routine and confidence. She told her community group, “I was just passing time.”

On her first visit, she paused at the doorway, unsure if she belonged. A volunteer stepped in with a warm smile, offered her a drink and guided her to a seat near the fire. They introduced her to someone who also loved gardening. By the end of the visit, Margaret was smiling and asking what would be on the menu the following week.

Over the next few weeks, Margaret became a familiar face. The home-cooked meals were lovely, but it was the kindness and connection that changed everything. She brought garden cuttings, recipes and second-hand scarves “just in case anyone needed one.”

She took part in stretching sessions and found her way back to creativity at the craft table. “I’ve not touched a paintbrush since my husband passed,” she said, “but this just felt right.”

Her confidence bloomed. She slept better, felt less anxious and even hosted a small lunch for two friends who rarely went out. “This space has given me something to look forward to. It’s helped me find my way back to people—and to myself.”

Margaret is now one of the group’s most enthusiastic ambassadors, gently encouraging newcomers and helping set up each week.

> **"I thought I was done with new chapters in life, but it turns out I was just on the wrong page! This place has helped me start again.”**
>
> — Margaret, Bishop Auckland

Stories from the community

James's Journey: From Unemployment to New Beginnings

James, 34, from Peterlee, lost his job in construction when the pandemic hit and never quite recovered. 'I was applying for jobs but getting nowhere. My confidence was shot, and I was spending all day in my cold flat, too depressed to do anything.'

His sister dragged him to the Welcome Space. 'I didn't want to go – I thought it was for old people or families. But there were people of all ages, all backgrounds. We played pool, had lunch, and I started talking to one of the volunteers who used to work in construction.'

That volunteer helped James update his CV and connected him with a local building firm. 'Within three weeks, I had an interview. Within six weeks, I had a job. The Welcome Space gave me hope when I had none. Now I have a job, a routine, and people who care about me. I still go every week - it's my community now.'
friends I'll have for life.

> **"The Welcome Space gave me hope when I had none. Now I have a job, a routine, and people who care about me."**
>
> — James, 34, Peterlee

Stories from the community

The Ahmed Family: A Warm Welcome for Newcomers

The Ahmed family arrived in Durham from Syria three years ago. This winter was their first in their own home, and they struggled with the cold and the costs. “In Syria, we never needed heating like this,” explains Fatima, mother of three. “We didn't understand the bills, and we were scared to use the heating.”

A support worker told them about the Welcome Space. “It was wonderful. Warm, friendly, and our children could play safely. We met other families, learned about energy support, and practiced our English. The volunteers helped us understand our bills and apply for support we didn't know existed.”

Now the Ahmeds are regulars, and Fatima volunteers in the kitchen. “This is our community now. We came as strangers needing help, and now we help others. That's what community means.”

Tom's Transformation: From Loneliness to Purpose

Tom, 58, from Stanley, took early retirement due to health issues. “I went from working 50 hours a week to nothing. My wife works full-time, and suddenly I was alone all day in an empty house. The heating costs were astronomical, and I felt useless.”

Tom saw a poster for the Welcome Space at his GP surgery. “I thought, why not? I had nothing else to do. That first day, I met other men in similar situations. We started a men's group - we talk, play cards, do woodworking projects. It's given me purpose again.”

The group has built planters for the community garden, repaired furniture for families in need, and created a tool library. “We're using our skills to help others. My mental health has improved dramatically. I'm not just sitting at home anymore - I'm part of something bigger.”

Common threads

These stories, and hundreds like them across County Durham, share common themes: isolation transformed into connection, despair replaced by hope, and individuals finding purpose through community. Welcome Spaces have proven to be more than warm rooms - they are catalysts for personal transformation and community resilience.

What began as a response to the cost-of-living crisis has evolved into a movement of community care, where people support each other through difficult times and celebrate together in good times. The spaces have become woven into the fabric of their communities, essential infrastructure for social connection and mutual support.

The Intergenerational Connection

At the Seaham Welcome Space, something special happened.

Teenagers from the local youth club started volunteering, helping serve meals and run activities. 'At first, the older attendees were sceptical,' recalls coordinator Linda. 'But magic happened.'

The teens taught digital skills to older attendees, helping them video call grandchildren and shop online. In return, older attendees taught traditional crafts, shared life stories, and provided mentorship. 'These relationships have transformed both groups,' Linda explains.

One teenager, Jake, 16, says: 'My gran died last year, and I missed her so much. The older people here have become like adopted grandparents. They give me advice, and I help them with tech. It's brilliant.'

Looking ahead

Building for the Future

The success of the Welcome Spaces fund has demonstrated that community-led solutions can address complex social challenges. Groups have also sought to develop sustainable models that will continue beyond the initial funding period:

- Diverse income streams through fundraising, donations, and partnerships
- Strong volunteer bases that reduce operational costs
- Partnerships with local businesses and organisations
- Integration with existing community services and facilities
- Demonstrated impact that attracts additional funding

Successful Strategies

Analysis of the most successful Welcome Spaces reveals common strategies that other communities can learn from:

- Community ownership and leadership
- Flexible, responsive programming
- Welcoming, non-judgmental atmosphere
- Strong volunteer recruitment and support
- Partnerships with other services
- Regular communication and promotion
- Monitoring and adapting to community needs

Key outcomes and impact

Social Impact:

- 12,400+ people reached across County Durham
- 89% report reduced social isolation
- 850+ volunteers mobilised
- 78% made new friendships
- Intergenerational connections fostered

Health and wellbeing:

- 78,000+ hot meals served
- 82% report improved mental health
- Reduced GP visits for cold-related illness
- Health checks and wellness activities
- Improved physical health outcomes

Economic Impact:

- £329,000 invested in communities
- £680,000 value of volunteer time
- 67% accessed additional support services
- 45+ people secured employment
- £1.2m additional funding leveraged

Community resilience:

- 94% of spaces will continue operating
- 67 new partnerships formed
- Stronger community networks
- Increased community pride
- Sustainable volunteer infrastructure

Lessons learned

What worked well:

- Simple application process that didn't burden small groups
- Flexible funding that allowed groups to respond to local needs
- Quick decision-making that enabled rapid response
- Support and networking opportunities between groups
- Trust in community organisations to deliver
- Groups able to lever in cash to continue

Areas for development:

- Earlier planning for sustainability beyond funding
- More structured volunteer training and support
- Better coordination with existing services
- Stronger evaluation frameworks from the start
- More support for groups in rural areas

Conclusion

The Welcome Spaces fund has demonstrated that relatively modest investment in community-led initiatives can generate profound and lasting impact. What began as an emergency response to the cost-of-living crisis has evolved into a sustainable model of community support that addresses multiple social challenges simultaneously.

The success of these spaces lies not just in the warmth and meals they provide, but in the dignity, connection, and hope they restore. They have proven that communities, when supported and trusted, have the capacity to care for their own members in ways that are responsive, compassionate, and effective.

As we look to the future, the Welcome Spaces model offers valuable lessons for addressing social challenges: trust communities, provide flexible support, enable local solutions, and invest in the social infrastructure that binds us together. The warmth generated by these spaces - both literal and metaphorical – will continue to sustain County Durham's communities for years to come.

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