



pay energy bills this winter, offering not just a refuge from the cold, but a community.

A total of 485 Church of England churches so far have signed up to a *Warm Welcome Spaces* campaign – a UK wide network of more than 5,000 venues across the country including libraries and churches – offering a warm place for anybody in the community.

Nearly 400 Church of England churches are also part of the *Places of Welcome* network, coordinated by Church Urban Fund, which encourages community groups to provide their neighbourhoods with venues to meet every week all year round.

Diocese of Manchester authorised lay ministers Paul and Gemma Tombling (pictured below) coordinate three warm spaces a week in churches in the Wythenshawe area of Manchester, attracting more than 100 people.

The sessions offer a range of services including advice sessions – at St Luke’s Church, in collaboration with the Bread and Butter Thing charity – a food bank at St Richard’s Church and a hot meal at St Andrew’s Methodist Church working with William Temple Church.

The warm spaces also offer arts and craft activities at two of the churches and breakfast clubs during the school holidays. St Richard’s and St Andrew’s are part of the *Places of Welcome* network.

“I have lived in poverty so I know and understand what people are going through, I grew up in a very low income family,” Gemma said. “During the Covid pandemic, the churches stepped up to do as much as they could to support their communities and most of this work has grown from this time.”



St Nicholas Church in Strood, Kent, provides a Warm Space – a weekly session from December to March with WiFi, hot drinks and free food.

The warm space started four years ago as the church wanted to respond to pressures people faced following the Covid pandemic including the rising cost of living and isolation.

Rev Sue Vallente-Kerr, vicar of St Nicholas Church said, the church delivered over 100 hampers to local families in need before Christmas.

“We’re just looking for ways to support people and we’re now considering running the space beyond March,” she said.

St Thomas’s in Ensbury Park, Bournemouth, provides meals and activities for around 60 people a week, in two sessions a week, with refreshments, simple meals and activities such as indoor curling, board games and crafts.

A third monthly Saturday morning session in the church offers breakfast and a ‘clothes swap’ – where free donated clothes are offered to those who need them.

The Rev Canon Simon Evans, Vicar of St Thomas’s, said the church had joined the Warm Welcome campaign in 2022 and the sessions, attracting a wide range of ages, proved so popular that they expanded to running all year.

“We were exploring how we could reach out into the community and we saw this need. It is really a way of expressing what our Christian faith is – the love and the care of Jesus,” he said.

“The cold is less of an issue for many of the people who attend – they are more concerned about isolation and the need for company and

parcels for people who are in need.”



The figures do not include parish and cathedral initiatives to help people struggling with bills that are not registered with the networks.

In Wigan, eight Church of England churches, supported by Wigan Council, are offering a warm space alongside the chance to shop at food clubs, or low cost food shops, with some registered with the Warm Welcome campaign.

The warm spaces offer light refreshments and the chance to play board games and take part in activities.

Wells Cathedral, a heritage landmark famed for its Early English Gothic architecture, has reopened its 'Warm Rail' for the third year running, providing free donated winter coats and warm clothing, scarves, hats and shoes – to all who need them.

The Cathedral's café is also open during the week, with free tea and coffee and a 'warm space' for people who cannot afford to heat their homes over the winter.

The Bishop of Winchester, Philip Mounstephen, who is Chair of the ChurchWorks Commission, said: "So many churches are offering warm spaces for people struggling to pay their energy bills this winter - not only with the Warm Welcome campaign but through other networks and as part of the work of our parish churches.

"I give thanks for all that is being done by our congregations and parishes, who are motivated by their Christian faith and Jesus's command to love your neighbour.

"The warm welcome isn't just about energy bills. Everyone of us has our God given value and dignity. These spaces provide friendship, kindness and a sense of community, so crucial to well being."

Today marks the start of Warm Welcome week. For more details see: [Warm Welcome Campaign](#)

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