



Keeping Connected through the Winter

Tips to help people and community groups in rural or isolated communities to think about how to keep connected and carry on during winter.

About these tips

Lots of people find winter a challenge. And it can be a challenge for community groups too. This is especially true in more rural areas.

We've been working with people in communities across the Borders. People have told us about their tips for keeping going, especially through the bad weather when it can become harder for people to keep connected with other people and with the services they use.

We are sharing their tips as a resource for community groups and for people who want to stay in touch with friends and neighbours. We hope these are useful and will prompt you to come up with and share your own ideas.

"Winter can be especially difficult for people living in more isolated rural locations."

"It is the cold dark spell after Christmas and New Year that is hardest, when the winter really sets in and there isn't so much to look forward to."

"Staying in touch with people makes us all feel better. This is the time of year when you need to stay connected."

Keeping going and working in different ways – for community groups and for friends

Think of different ways to do things over the winter

You do not have to do things in the same way all through the year. Here are some of the changes community groups can make to regular sessions. They can also work where friends see each other.

- Meet more often – especially when other activities that people in your group or area use have stopped until the Spring.
- Change the times when you get together – you can start and finish earlier, so people get home before it is dark, or do something in the evening as well as daytime activities.
- Change the days if that helps, such as getting together at the weekend.
- Do different things, such as some indoor activities for groups who do outside things, or just to have more variety.

- Have sessions in different places, to cut down the travelling. It may mean that a few people get along to several smaller gatherings, but that is better than not getting out at all.
- Organise lift-sharing, especially if people can offer a four-wheel drive vehicle.

“Have an ‘indoor picnic’ at someone’s house, or in the village hall.”

“We take turns to drive our walking group to the place that we are walking from, so we spend less time outside. Then we walk back towards home and have an extra coffee together to fill up the remaining time.”

“Have a meal together for anyone in the village once a month or so, maybe on a Sunday lunchtime.”

“Do something for children to run off steam – a session in a village or church hall with games, indoor kurling or the like.”

“This is a lovely time of year for activities that bring together people across the generations.”

See the positives in this time of year

Use the ‘after the holidays’ in a positive way. For example, get people along to make things from the left over wrapping paper and cards, such as gift tags to use or sell next autumn.

Do something for Burns’ Night or St Valentine’s Day, or any other day you want to enjoy.

Plan for the better days, such as checking out places and activities you will enjoy in the spring and summer.

Have a back-up plan for the days when things have to change

Think about the other things that can happen more often in winter as well as bad weather.

- This is when we tend to get more colds and winter illnesses, or look after other people who are poorly.
- Things can go wrong with buildings, such as a leaky roof or the heating breaking down.

Have a back-up person within the group for opening up the hall, co-ordinating what you do, and so on.

Let people know as much in advance as possible what the winter plans are when sessions won’t be running.

Think about where else you can meet, or what else you can do, if something goes wrong with your usual location.

Finding a place to meet

Talk to a local café owner – they may be able to tell you when would be a quiet time for your group to come to their café. See if you can arrange a deal as they might be glad of the custom.

Some groups do not have a shared bank account and a constitution, which can make it difficult to hire a hall from sources such as the Council. But there are other things you can do

- Agree to split the costs. One person then books it as an individual, and the rest of you pay her back
- Look out for places such as church halls that are not as bothered about this
- Ask if another group can help you – offering you space on their premises, or doing the booking for you.

“Finding an indoor space that is suitable and affordable for all just to hang out can be a challenge.”

“Always have a Plan B, so you are ready for whatever happens.”

“If you feel a session might not be able to run due to bad weather, it is better to be honest about this from the beginning.”

Staying in touch with each other – for groups and friends

Plan how you will keep in touch with people to check in on them if they don't make it along to a regular session, or to keep in touch in between the times you meet. It can be phone, text or Facebook message, whatever works for them.

Have a 'phone tree' for passing on information, especially for people who are not on social media. Make use of central contacts, such as the school secretary.

Keep a note of people's phone numbers, in case you have a power cut and can't get to the information stored in your phone etc.

Agree if it is ok for people to pop in and phone to just see that you are each ok. See this as a two-way thing – the person doing the popping in benefits from the chats and regular contact too. Don't feel guilty about asking for favours – most folk are happy to help out without expecting any sort of 'payback'.

Remember this is for everyone, not just older people. Winter can be hard for families with young children and for young people on their own.

"Someone from one of our groups can't always come to sessions and he sends videos of himself saying hello to different members and I send ones back with people from the group saying hello. This way he can connect even with members who don't use the internet."

"Have group Facebook conversations on days you can't meet."

"Let people know that if they don't want to go out in the cold/snow then that's OK. It doesn't mean they can't be involved nor that they aren't involved in the project or group anymore."

Travelling about – for groups, for friends and for individuals

Always take essentials when travelling at this time of year – food, water, money.

Sometimes people feel overwhelmed by worrying about transport. It can be helpful if group organisers check transport options and give some assurance that services like taxis don't automatically stop just because there is snow or storms.

Share what your plans are as much in advance as you can, so people have time to make their own plans for transport etc.

Offer to put people in touch with each other so they can arrange to share taxis or lifts.

If possible, community groups could offer to pay for transport for people who would otherwise struggle to come along. If your group doesn't have money for that, you can start adding it in to your plans for next year.

Be ready for times when travel takes longer.

- Charge up your phone etc and carry a phone charger for car cigarette lighter.
- Have warm clothes and a blanket in the car, and other emergency items – torch, shovel and so on.
- Consider getting winter or all-season tyres on your car.
- Top up with fuel in case the garage you are counting on or the road is closed.

"Line up some people you could potentially share a lift with – through Facebook, friends, colleagues."

"Think of a contingency plan for emergencies, such as the bus not running or problems with your car. Or have some phone numbers of people who regularly make the same journey."

"When you do manage to meet up, make use of your group contacts to speak to people and make emergency plans for collecting children, etc."

“Travel plans affect everyone. Talk to your younger neighbours or colleagues. They may not have the experience or confidence to know about when to ask to leave work early, for example.”

“Turn your car at night so that it faces the direction of the rising sun!”

“If you have a map app on your phone this should help you with estimated journey times and will include info on traffic holdups or road closures.”

Helping each other with your own Winter Plan – for everyone

We can each have our own plan to be ready for winter.

But it can be hard to step back and think about what we need, and how to solve the potential problems. Friends or people who know each other through a community group can help each other think about this.

This is our starter list for points you may want in your plan:

- Keeping safe and warm at home
- Keeping in touch with people
- Having things to do when the weather is bad
- Keeping well – medicines and aspects like getting out in daylight and fresh air
- Shopping and having enough food to manage if the weather is bad for a while
- Looking out for other people – your friends and relatives, neighbours, people who live nearby
- Having a back-up plan in case the people and services you usually rely on can't make it, or if you are held up.

Reminding each other that this season can be fun too can help. Use positive language and speak about things like being cosy indoors (Google 'Hygge' for some simple ideas), or watching the changing trees (and weather!) through the window.

There are good suggestions on coping with Christmas and New Year, or for the winter, that get circulated at the start of winter. Sending them round again in January and February is a good idea, as this is the time that people may want that advice.

Remind yourself and your friends that this time of year is difficult for lots of people, and it is OK to say that.

“Life isn't like how it appears on adverts and not to feel bad if they don't have lots of winter plans. Sharing the ‘Surviving Christmas and New Year’ booklets [available via otbds.org] helps start a conversation around this.”

“Think of ways to make life easier at home. For example, consider using the launderette for towels/sheets as that reduces the washing build-up in bad weather. It

also helps reduce mould build-up when you don't have damp washing hanging around the house."

"This is the time of year I use online supermarket deliveries. You can share an order with neighbours if that helps. Or have a couple of people to go for a big shop for yourselves and others in the village."

"In the Borders it is being ready for power cuts. I feel candles are not so safe for me these days, but the wee lights with batteries are great so I now have a stock of them, plus spare batteries."

"Line up emergency helpers for home if you are held up – dog walker, spare key stashed somewhere, neighbour to switch on lights, neighbour to watch and feed children etc."

"Remember about the help sought/offered via local Facebook pages. Often there are crews of volunteers clearing paths and looking in on folk who are isolated etc. Find your local 'resilient communities' group."

"Is it cold or just dreich? Remember your endorphins and SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder – feeling depressed in the shorter days). Try to get out in daylight as much as possible, even on a cold winter's day. It will keep you feeling positive and help your mental wellbeing."

"Don't suffer in silence! If you are feeling really low, there are many local and national groups which can help. Look for local listings on Council or NHS websites."

"Tuning into Local Radio is really helpful at this time of year. There is a feeling of connectedness generally during bad weather."

Planning for work – for community groups and individuals

Workers need their winter plans too

- Try to keep the office or group's diary updated so that people know where you all should be
- Use Skype rather than meeting face to face
- Save a list of 'admin'/desk-based tasks for when you end up stuck at home (share around if someone else is stuck!)
- Offer a colleague a bed for the night if it makes sense, rather than them travelling unnecessarily in bad weather
- Be aware of an alternative community space which offers wifi etc

Check what times are best for people to meet. Emphasise how flexible you can be with the time you meet to allow people to have more time to get there.

Meet halfway rather than travelling for miles.

Suggest to people organising meetings or events that they could share people's details (with permission) so that they can organise sharing lifts or travelling together.

Plan for sessions and events where having smaller numbers can work well.

Be aware of colleagues' wellbeing too – winter ailments and when people are feeling down. Think twice before meeting up and passing on any germs or viruses!

“If people are feeling a bit down about Christmas and New Year then having planning sessions where you encourage people to be excited about spring and summer plans can work well.”

Thanks

Thank you to everyone involved in Happiness Habits, Families and the other Outside the Box projects who contributed your tips.

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