

Action with Communities in Rural England



Supporting vibrant and sustainable rural communities through the RCC network and its partners

News Release

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Report celebrates the success of volunteers managing buildings, but highlights a fragile future

Use of England's rural community-owned buildings has trebled since 1988, according to the research undertaken in ACRE's 2009 national survey of rural community buildings. The key findings celebrate the success of volunteers and the buildings they manage in supporting local action and service delivery.

The 9,000 halls represent the largest network of community-owned facilities in the country with a total asset value of over £3 billion. They are a crucial but largely hidden aspect of community empowerment, and many have proved 'hard to reach' in efforts to support their sustainability. Although there are significant success stories to tell, the future for most is quite fragile.

The survey responses from 2,355 rural community buildings shows that volunteers contributed 18.5 hours per week on average to run their halls and that this volunteer support was the most significant factor in whether the halls were able to sustain themselves financially. Only 3% of halls received regular funding from their local authority. The remainder generating their income through hire charges, services and fundraising support from the local community and parish councils.

The survey also includes feedback on the valuable support service provided by the Rural Community Action Network to volunteers managing the halls; 83% of hall committees seeking their advice had rated it good or excellent.

ACRE's Chief Executive, Sylvia Brown said *"We need national and local policy makers and funders to appreciate that the work of managing and financing this vast network of community facilities falls almost entirely to local volunteers, not to local authorities. The traditional village hall still underpins much of community life in rural areas. The research demonstrates its role in supporting local democratic participation and in helping those most in need because of lack of transport with which to access more distant services"*.

"The Rural Community Action Network already recognises the incremental burden of increasing regulation and taxation that falls on local volunteers when few halls have any paid management staff to support their work. The data from the survey shows just how many of the 9,000 halls need appropriate external advice and support if they are to remain viable. Whilst public policy is focused on transferring new assets to communities, we are now very concerned to raise awareness of existing community owned assets that perform such a crucial role for local people".

ACRE's Village Hall Information Officer, Deborah Clarke concluded: *"As a result of this survey, we have made 10 recommendations which we believe could make a huge difference to volunteers and the future of these community assets which have significant value in both financial terms and the outcomes they produce for communities"*

Ends

Note for Editors:

1. This is ACRE's third comprehensive survey of rural community buildings in England. Previous surveys were carried out in 1988 and 1998. **The launch of the key findings from the 2009 survey will take place on Thursday 12 November** in Westminster at the AGM of the National Village Hall's Forum.
2. The 10 recommendations in the report are:
 1. Government policy on asset transfer should be re-balanced to ensure adequate recognition and support of the management of assets worth over £3 billion which are already in community ownership in rural communities.
 2. Government proposals should be better scrutinized to assess the regulatory impact on volunteer-run assets and services which dominate rural and urban community action.
 3. Government and funding bodies should actively seek a more realistic understanding of the volunteer support that sustains community owned assets and ensure policies and programmes better reflect both rural and urban community needs.
 4. Government should explore the potential for strategic investment in support services suitable for the significant proportion of 'hard to reach' community halls not accessing external advice and which are most vulnerable to risks such as loss of viability, volunteers or lack of compliance.
 5. Local government must recognise the contribution rural community owned buildings make to delivering local statutory objectives at little or no cost to them and ensure that a local register of rural community owned buildings is held in their area.
 6. Local government must recognise value of investing in a comprehensive proactive support service, available locally, tailored to the needs of rural community-owned buildings, which can maximise and sustain their value to the community.
 7. Local government and funding bodies should recognise the significant challenge hall committees face when they seek to raise funds for essential capital works and respond with coordinated grant schemes which match the profile of intermittent investment needs.
 8. Local government should exercise 100% rate relief on community-owned halls in recognition of their contribution to local well-being.
 9. Government, local government and statutory funding bodies should recognise the potential return and invest in energy efficiency and renewable energy provision in community halls.
 10. Parish Councils and local village hall management committees should work together to plan the future viability of facilities and ensure best value is achieved for the community, for example:
 - Encourage hall management committees to seek information, support and training from the local community buildings advisory service or network
 - Where necessary, establish a strategy of support involving, revenue finance or loan finance repaid from future precepts at an appropriate level for their community.
3. **Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) is the national body for the Rural Community Action Network**, providing a strategic view of rural community issues to government and its agencies based on grass roots experience. ACRE also works with a range of national third sector organisations to reflect a rural perspective in policy and practice. For more information on ACRE go to www.acre.org.uk
4. The **Rural Community Action Network** covers the whole of rural England through the work of 38 local member organisations, eight regional bodies and ACRE. Network members link national, regional and local policy with community action at the grassroots. The local member organisations are all independent charities, largely county-based. As local development agencies, RCAN members have been facilitating social change in rural communities for decades by providing tailored and comprehensive support to rural communities to enhance their quality of life and access to services. With a strong focus on local advocacy and brokering relationships between rural community aspirations and

local government strategies, RCAN members enhance the role of community action and self-reliance in rural areas across the country.

5. ACRE provides a national rural community buildings advice service, delivering technical advice and resource material through dedicated local advisers http://www.acre.org.uk/communityassets_villagehalls_findadvisor.html in each of its member organisations. ACRE also delivers the Rural Community Buildings Loan Fund on behalf of Defra.
6. ACRE acknowledges Defra's support for this research which was instrumental in enabling the hard copy distribution.
7. For more information about the **National Village Hall Forum** www.nvhf.btik.com

For further information about the survey and this press release contact Deborah Clarke, ACRE's Village Hall Information Officer. 01285 653477 or d.clarke@acre.org.uk