



Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) is the umbrella body for the network of 38 Rural Community Councils (RCCs) helping to sustain a thriving countryside. This series of papers provides evidence of the innovative approaches delivered by the Network of RCCs to support communities and combat rural disadvantage.

Village halls

The government is helping to support community activity, but buildings also matter. Village halls are vitally important - local services, playgroups, women's institutes, etc. won't survive - let alone thrive - without a roof over their head.

- Margaret Beckett, Rural Revival Conference, Local Government Association, February 2003

England's 8,900 village halls represent the largest network of community facilities in rural Britain. The term "village hall" is used generically for a range of rural buildings, including church and community halls, in which community activity takes place. In rural areas, halls are normally owned and managed by the local community, whereas urban community halls are typically owned by local authorities.

Village halls provide a focus for activities that support and improve the quality of life for rural populations, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and those affected by the lack of efficient transport. Traditionally, the main users are local voluntary organisations such as playgroups, parent and toddler groups, senior citizens' clubs, youth clubs and Women's Institutes or groups needing fundraising activities. Village halls also provide a focus for leisure activities, for example, badminton, bowls, amateur dramatic groups, art clubs, village festivals, social events and family celebrations. Such activities, services and leisure opportunities are recognised as important aspects of developing social capital within communities.

This paper demonstrates how Rural Community Councils are supporting and encouraging village halls in the following areas:

- Quality information, advice and support
- Relationships with parish councils
- Research
- Making it happen

Quality information, advice and support

The Rural Community Council (RCC) network of village hall advisers provides advice, information, training and advocacy for village hall management committees. This is supported by ACRE, which works with those advisers individually and collectively at regional level. ACRE also represents the interests of village halls at national level.

ACRE provides the network with a comprehensive range of publications including an adviser's handbook and 35 information sheets, which cover all the main legislative issues for village halls. ACRE's model documents are approved by the Charity Commission.

A number of RCCs provide specialist advice for village halls. Dorset Community Action's village hall adviser is able to carry out a full disability access audit, while the Community Council for Somerset has developed a quality standard programme for village halls. Durham RCC has a training package accredited through the North East Open College Network for community groups and those managing premises. Village hall advisers in seven RCCs are able to provide a one-day training course leading to the National Certificate for Personal Licence Holders.

Work at national level aims to raise awareness of the value and role of village and community halls. For example, ACRE has contributed to the development of the new guidance for fire regulations issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and is advising the Department for Culture, Media and Sport of the problems created for village halls by the Licensing Act which came into force in 2005.

Relationships with parish councils

Village halls are often used as the venue for parish council meetings. Parish councils are local statutory bodies that are required to take the lead on issues affecting the interests of the community, including the village hall. Parish councils can work with halls in a number of ways:

- Regularly providing funding for hall maintenance from the precept so that the management committee plans more effectively for both regular and intermittent expenditure
- Providing capital funding towards repairs or extensions
- Helping the governance of the hall by appointing a parish councillor onto the management committee
- Using the hall for committee or public meetings
- Helping to identify local needs through village appraisals or parish plans
- Helping to develop new activities by arranging joint meetings or providing small pump priming grants to those who want to take ideas forward.

Research

The RCC network has access to the vast majority of village halls across England, which places it in an excellent position to provide information and data on issues affecting halls.

Comprehensive surveys of village halls were carried out in 1988 and 1998 both of which provided a clear picture of the state of England's halls, their funding and use. *The status of funding*

for village halls report was published in 2002 and supported the case for a dedicated funding stream for village and community halls.

ACRE carried out detailed research in the North East¹ of England in 2003, which explored the role played by different village halls, where the halls were serving a range of populations from very small villages with just over 100 people, to halls in larger communities of up to 1,000 residents. The study developed a picture of opportunities and barriers facing each of these halls, taking into account:

- The geographical location of the hall in relation to other facilities and services
- The activity taking place in the hall
- The physical facilities and state of repair of the hall and
- How each hall was financed.

The research also developed a usage classification framework which attempts to measure social capital.

Further research by the Community Fund² confirmed that significant improvements made to the fabric and facilities within a community building generated activity that lessened social isolation and contributed to healthier living, the availability of more education and training opportunities, improved support for young families and access to local democracy.

The latest piece of research on village halls was carried out by Defra, with the support of ACRE and the RCC network. The results will be published in mid-2006. The research aimed to explore the funding of community buildings and their associated benefits.

¹ Role of a community building, ACRE 2003.
² Village hall & community buildings research, Issue 5, Community Fund 2003.

Making it happen

Village hall advisers in the RCC network provide help and guidance to village hall management committees in a variety of ways. The following five case studies are examples of the outcomes of their work.

Hemingford Abbots Village Hall in Cambridgeshire opened in June 2004 – the culmination of three years' hard work for the community. The new hall was built in a traditional style, using a mix of traditional and modern materials with flexible meeting facilities. It has a reception area, two internal meeting rooms and patio, serviced by a kitchen, storage and toilet areas. The hall is well used and offers, among others, tai chi classes and carpet bowls. It also has a stage and can provide a catwalk for shows.

It took three attempts and advice from **Cambridgeshire ACRE** to secure £250,000 from the Big Lottery Fund. Further grants were awarded by Landfill Tax Credit Scheme operators, the local parish council, the district council and the Living Spaces scheme. The hall's treasurer says: "Perseverance and imagination are the keys to a successful project."

This was certainly the case for another project in Hexton, which was supported by the village hall adviser of the **Community Development Agency for Hertfordshire**. St Faith's Community Centre was adapted from the nave of the church in order to provide a space in the community for all its social, educational and leisure activities. Negotiations with the diocesan church authorities took place and a licence arrangement was agreed. An extension providing toilet and kitchen facilities was sympathetically designed so that the external view and structure of the church remain unchanged. Church services still take place, whilst Hexton School, the playgroup, youth club and Women's Institute all hire the new space for their activities. It also attracts many private bookings.

Nafferton is a large village in East Riding of Yorkshire, which has access to many services, including transport links, which contribute to a vibrant, sustainable community. However, the village hall was dark and cold, and those with disabilities could not access the facilities. **Humber & Wolds RCC** worked with the committee while it raised funds to improve the premises. An insulated under-drawn ceiling, new boilers, a sanded floor, lighter wood wall panels and fresh paintwork made the hall brighter and warmer. Alterations and the addition of new toilet facilities have improved access for all. The committee is pleased that three new groups started using the hall within the first four months after completion of the project.

Phase two of a project to update Gamblesby village hall in Cumbria is under way, having benefited from the support of **Voluntary Action Cumbria**. Partly funded by the Defra Rural Enterprise Scheme, the extension will provide a kitchen, small meeting room and toilet facilities. At the rear of the extension will be a wind turbine to generate electricity. This will complement the energy-saving features already installed during the first phase, which was the refurbishment of the main hall. The hall benefits from being heated by a ground source heat pump

and is fully insulated with lambs' wool insulation. Phase one was mainly funded by North Pennines Leader+, with the village hall management committee making good use of the skills available in the community.

In Coldwalton, West Sussex, the Sandham Memorial Village Hall has been successfully run for many years by a committee of volunteers. However, it needed to sort out its constitutional and legal arrangements before it could apply for grant aid to modernise the hall. The committee had no legal authority to run the hall, which was a church hall – an ecclesiastical charity – set up in 1903. **Action in Rural Sussex** helped the committee and Parochial Church Council to apply to the Charity Commission for an Albemarle Scheme. This authorised the Parochial Church Council to lease the hall to a village hall trust based on the *ACRE model trust deed for village halls*. ACRE's honorary legal adviser helped the committee to negotiate terms for the lease with the Chichester Diocese, which is the Custodian Trustee for the church hall. In November 2005, the committee held a celebration to mark the completion of a four-year process to sort out the legalities.

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