

Briefing

Village halls, volunteers and their support service

Background

ACRE circulated an e-survey of 10 questions to village hall management committees via its Network and responses were received from 1,300 across rural England. We can assume that the respondents are most likely those who are active in their community, are able and willing to use the technology required to answer the questions and who are members of their local rural community council.

ACRE carried out in-depth research in 1988, 1998 and 2009 surveying 10,000 village halls using post and email to distribute survey forms in order to ensure reach into rural communities of all types. The Key Findings Report and accompanying five reports for the 2009/2011 survey are available at www.acre.org.uk.

The unique network of community-owned and managed village halls is part of England's rural heritage and fulfils the need of those communities by providing a social centre from where activities and services for all ages can be delivered.

Village halls were often built as memorials to those who gave their lives in WW1 and WW2. Communities also took over redundant Army and RAF huts some of which are still in use today. Many village halls were previously schools or chapels. The 1,300 responses to this survey indicate steady provision of new build halls over the last four decades.

Hall committees have to comply with a range of legislation. In this survey they told us:

- 63% of their halls held a Premises Licence and 33% of those included the sale of alcohol
- 7% are registered for VAT
- 55% receive 100% rate relief
- 74% are licensed under the PRS and PPL Community Buildings Tariff for copyright music

Also, in the past 4 years 73% of the hall committees had spent an average of £11,250 undertaking work.

This is what village hall management committees tell us about the activities in their hall.

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Assessing the range of activities in halls and identifying cohesive patterns has been attempted in other research reports undertaken by ACRE¹. This survey indicates that halls continue to provide the venue for traditional social activities such as uniformed groups (Guides, Scouts etc), Women's Institute, whist, bridge, gardening and bowls clubs alongside newer recreational and sporting activity such as Zumba and Pilates. Regular users are pre-schools, nurseries and mother and toddler groups together with fitness and dancing groups of all types. Activities for older people are particularly important in rural communities isolated by lack of public transport. Halls also provide a meeting place for the hall committee and Parish Council and the polling station for elections.

On average the management committees reported that their hall had hosted nine life events in 2013 i.e. christening parties, wedding celebration or funeral receptions and nine birthday parties for all ages. 848 halls hosted 1,318 events for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012.

The survey asked if any new activity had started in the hall that could be attributed to the Olympics or TV programmes such as The Great British Bake Off. Responses indicate that dance activity in the hall may have been influenced by Strictly Come Dancing and increases in sports and fitness activity could also be linked to national crazes and awareness of keeping fit and losing weight.

It appears from the comments received that new activities and services usually start because a need is identified in the community (the older residents want to meet every week and have lunch) or because an individual in the community champions an activity either as an instructor or through personal interest or a service develops because of a local college initiative such as delivering outreach training.

Volunteers tell us about recruitment and their commitment to the community

The management committees volunteer as they have an interest in providing and maintaining their building. On average the youngest member of the responding management committees is 42 and the oldest 73. We are informed that 59% have problems recruiting volunteers as people are not interested, too busy or too old. The main complaint of the committees is that people want to use the hall but they don't want to run it. A range of skills is needed in order to maintain a hall from finance and administration to marketing and negotiation and the general day to day

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maintenance. 44% of the committees tell us they are supported by paid staff with 7% employing three or more.

Village hall management committees could not provide the range of activities and services without additional volunteer support either those helping to run the hall or putting on events. Calculating the number of volunteer hours is not an exact science and in some cases hall management committees have told us it's impossible to work out and in others the committees have only been able to calculate an approximate figure. Given those caveats the survey indicates averages of 250 volunteer hours per hall per year are needed to provide activities and events in England's village halls (this excludes hours put in by the management committees).

In addition, England's volunteers and users of the halls drink 96,595 cups of tea and eat 6,185 packets of biscuits per week!

Community enterprise and business activity takes place in village halls

This survey notes that some village halls are providing space for enterprises such as Post Offices, community shops and coffee shops, libraries, cinemas and farmers markets. 72% of those enterprises paid a rent to the hall and 5% covenanted back the profits. 23% of hall management committees said that the hall doesn't benefit from the enterprise.

Village halls contribute to the rural economy by providing a space for individuals to earn their living through providing exercise classes, training courses and catering. Responses to the survey indicate that 12,039 individuals, small businesses and professionals use the village hall to earn their living, or part of it, during the year.

There has never been a better time for committees to consider the economic value their hall provides, write a business plan, approach local businesses, talk to local authorities and work with their parish council or parochial church council.

The new legal forms, the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) model or an IPS Community Benefit Society (BenCom), may enable halls to take on new roles and consider other finance models. These models allow many charitable halls previously tied to the perceived restrictions of charity law to consider other opportunities for investment. Loans and finance through community share issue are the future for funding capital investment together with social enterprises that reinvest in the community.

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Making radical changes to provide services won't be appropriate for all village halls and their committees, but it is appropriate to consider all possible forms of income generation as grant funding sources decrease.

How can volunteers managing village halls access support?

The ACRE Network has provided the support service for village halls since the 1920s and has a wealth of experience across rural England.

Support for volunteers managing halls is delivered by a Network of 38 advisers who are supported by ACRE. Information sheets, model documents, training and one-to-one advice by email and post is available. Where resources allow advisers can visit hall committees to provide support with almost anything from constitutional structures to funding applications and energy efficiency audits. Advisers also have access to expert legal advice should committees need it.

Whilst the ACRE Network is keen to ensure that village halls continue to thrive in a fast changing environment, it is constantly considering the best way to maintain support levels and volunteers are being encouraged to become more businesslike in their approach to managing halls.

ACRE is one of four organisations working with the Charity Commission to provide land and property advice for village halls. ACRE also manages the Defra Rural Community Buildings Loan Fund which provides loans for acquisition, maintenance and extension of village halls.

For more information about the services that the ACRE Network can provide visit the ACRE website: www.acre.org.uk.

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ⁱ The Role of the Community Building August 2003