

Executive Summary

- Building on the Village and Community Halls Survey in 2020, this research provides insights into the ongoing impact of Covid-19, notably on the operations, governance, finances and service provision of halls. The survey was circulated to respondents from the 2020 survey and achieved 1,017 responses. The similarities between the two samples in the 2020 and 2021 aids an assessment of change, and helps us to understand the significant impact of the pandemic.
- 15 per cent of halls have played a formal role in response to the pandemic, specifically through emergency food provision, hosting NHS services (including testing and vaccinations), and the provision of childcare. The pandemic has reaffirmed the importance of halls in periods of emergency as designated places of safety. **However, this statutory status confers few additional resources, and this should be addressed where halls take on extra responsibilities.** Another cohort of halls have been wholly closed throughout the Covid-19 outbreak, with various implications for the halls themselves and their local communities.
- There are worrying signs that some halls (1.4 per cent of our sample) will not open again, and this is likely to be a minimum figure. When grossed to the national level this could mean the closure of 140 individual halls and is an indicator of the immediate need for support.
- The current financial health of halls is somewhat polarised, with around the same proportion having seen their finances improve or worsen. There appears to be a relationship between the size of the population served and a hall's financial health. Those serving bigger communities have generally seen a worsening in their financial position and heavier reliance on reserves, and this may reflect differing financial models and income streams.
- Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants have been highly valued, alongside other small business grants and rate reliefs. This, alongside local authority and parish council support, has enabled halls to stabilise their finances. Halls receiving Covid-19 related grants and payments were significantly less likely to see their financial position as having worsened.
- Around nine per cent of halls employing staff had reduced their staffing hours, a sign that internal capacity may be diminishing. This will have the consequence of placing even more pressure on volunteers.
- While grants and payment have stabilised, or at least mitigated, the damage to most hall finances, the long-term outlook is uncertain. Open responses suggest halls are worried about users returning, and the financial implications of this. Halls are not commercial entities, and their business models reflect this. Therefore, applying the same expectations about recovery as those for commercial enterprises will not be appropriate. There are significant and justified worries about the return of *both* volunteers and users. **We recommend urgent attention is given to some form of bridging funding or finance, so halls can survive this challenging period with its uncertainties about when users and volunteers will return.**
- Halls stated that this type of flexible grant funding is the most important form of support that could be provided. Alongside this, continued relief from business rates was deemed

critical. **It is recommended that halls across England should benefit from the mandatory and full discretionary rate relief, and policy mechanisms should be used to ensure this happens at the local authority level.** The preferred forms of support largely align with the wider community business sector, with the exception of rate reliefs. **We therefore recommend exploring broad-based interventions which could impact across the community business sector.**

- A significant number of halls that had planned improvements are now not going ahead with these. **In order to ensure these improvements are undertaken the Village Hall Improvement Grant Fund should be re-established. This could potentially target halls that had to postpone or cancel work in order to use their reserves to replace lost income.** The building of new halls, or replacement of old ones, are the *most likely* improvements to have been abandoned by respondents. In quantity only 23 respondents stated they had previously planned to replace their hall. However, eight of these projects are now no longer going ahead.
- Another cohort of halls have invested during the pandemic to improve their buildings and services, seemingly using the opportunities presented as halls have been closed. New activities are being designed to diversify the user base, and capital investments have been made to facilitate this. However, certain activities in some halls will not return, notably yoga, dance and Pilates classes. There are specific worries that older users will not return, and that related activities will fold. **We recommend that the ACRE Network undertakes work nationally to promote the availability of halls and their uses to different audiences and user groups.**
- Halls stated that the biggest problem they faced was the drop in fundraising, alongside challenges in managing services under Covid-19 restrictions and the associated pressures this placed on volunteers. There is reticence among older volunteers about returning to voluntary commitments. The difficulties recruiting new volunteers may affect the return of services and activities, as well the prospect of good governance.
- Analysis of open responses highlights three categories of support central to halls as they recover from Covid-19: 1) increased community involvement to run and govern halls and to restart activities, 2) financial support to maintain and improve buildings, as well as enabling halls to grow their income for long term sustainability, and 3) information, advice and training on Covid-19 related regulations, and also wider issues concerning health and safety, recruitment and fundraising.
- Over half the halls responding to the survey (54 per cent) had sought advice from their village hall/community building service provided by an ACRE Network member since February 2020. 98 per cent felt this support was 'good' or 'excellent'. Although respondents emphasise the quality and importance of the information ACRE prepares and publishes, there is still a need for updated information and guidance, particularly in respect to changing regulations and the easing of restrictions. **The ACRE Network should continue to provide vital support in this area. To do this ACRE Network members need to be adequately resourced to deliver their support services.**