Executive Summary

Introduction and aims

This report is an independent analysis of the Village and Community Halls survey, which was run with halls across England during the early part of 2020. The analysis has been conducted by the Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research (CRESR), at Sheffield Hallam University, on behalf of Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). For 30 years, ACRE has conducted surveys with village and community halls at tenyear intervals, the last being in 2009. These surveys provide ACRE and its members with up to date information about the operations, finances and management of halls, along with their social and economic impact. This helps ACRE advocate and influence a range of stakeholder on behalf of halls, as well as inform the support required.

Methods and sampling

The Survey was designed and deployed by ACRE via online software, helped greatly by ACRE Network members who encouraged halls to complete it. Online surveying represents a departure from the previous years when postal surveys were used. This has important implications for the sample and our interpretation of the results. It is also significant that a large proportion of responses were received before the lockdown measures relating to the coronavirus pandemic were introduced. Certain respondents may have been more aware of the potential impact that this would have.

The Survey obtained 2,109 unique responses from individual village and community halls. This represents approximately 21 per cent of all known halls in England. Based on an estimated population of 10,000 village and community halls nationally, the calculated margin of error for a typical variable is ±0.8 per cent at the 95 per cent level. In practice, this means we can have a high degree of confidence that if the survey was replicated, results would not differ by very much. Through the report we make comparisons with responses in the 2009 survey and earlier surveys, except where differences in survey questions make this inappropriate.

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Halls and their communities

Halls are rooted in their communities, with half of those surveyed serving areas with a population of less than 1,000. In the 2020 survey, halls serving larger populations make up a greater proportion of respondents than in previous years. It is unclear whether this is a product of methodological changes, or whether other factors such as housing growth, the broader 'reach' of halls and other factors may have affected this.

Over 60 per cent of respondent halls stated that they were the only hall or similar meeting place in their village, a small increase from 2009. Wider evidence on the closure of churches, pubs and other public venues suggests a process of residualisation is taking place; village and community halls are, in many communities, the last community assets left standing.

Buildings

Over 50 per cent of those surveyed were 80 years old or more. The replacement and new development of halls is taking place at a relatively unchanged pace. The period 2010-2020 led to approximately the same amount of new halls being developed as the preceding decade, 20002009.

Over one third of halls reported that their roofs and/or gutters were either inadequate, in unsatisfactory condition and/or in need of urgent repair. Older halls (pre-1945) reported a higher number of problems in relation to different elements of the building.

Just over a third of respondent halls suggested that their car park is inadequate for their needs and/or in bad condition - 16 per cent had no car park at all. This is likely to have important ramifications in terms who is able to access halls, and how much revenue can be derived. This is interrelated with the decline in bus services, particularly at weekends.

Major renovations are planned by a number of halls, with 16 per cent of those surveyed due to undertake work costing more than £100,000. The potential value of planned work is between £81m - £154m. Using this information to estimate the cost of such work over the next five years for all halls in England this is likely to be between £384m and £730m. Such investment would deliver significant local economic benefits, particularly given that over 85 per cent plan to use local builders and suppliers for all or almost all of the work.

70 per cent of respondents in 2020 had undertaken improvement work, built extensions or rebuilt part or all of their hall in the last five years. 65 per cent of these halls reported increased use as a result of such work. The cost of this work is estimated to have been in the region of £46.6m and £97.6m, representing an important expenditure into local economies. The vast majority of halls (92 per cent) are not registered for VAT. It is estimated that the irrecoverable VAT from improvement work undertaken in the last five years could be in the region of £9.3m - £19.5m

Many halls were unable to meet such cost with their own funds (26 per cent), highlighting the important role of grant funding and donations. Despite a varied picture in terms of applications to grant funders, the most widespread grant making to halls has been through parish councils. Only 6 per cent of halls had accessed loan finance to undertake such work, down from 9 per cent in 2009. For over three quarters of halls the cost of this improvement work was less than £50,000. The Village Hall Improvement Grant Fund has set a minimum £50,000 threshold for applications. As only 22 per cent of halls carrying out work would have been eligible to apply, there is perhaps scope to lower the cost threshold for applications and assist more halls.

90 per cent of respondent halls reported that they had broadband and Wifi access, a dramatic increase from 2009 - only 9 per cent had broadband provision in this last survey. However, as this was an online survey, and some rural communities may have poor internet access, this may overstate the improvements.

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Accessibility

Over three quarters of halls now identify as being ‘fully accessible’, an increase of 5 per cent since 2009. The proportion of respondents suggesting that their hall had ‘access for wheelchair users throughout’ was high (73 per cent), though this represents a slight decline from 2009 when the equivalent figure 77 per cent of halls.

Approximately 16 per cent of halls are planning to undertake major improvements in the next five years to improve their facilities for disabled people.

Environmental impact

Many halls have installed technologies which reduce their impact on the environment, and in so doing, demonstrated the potential of these technologies to their local communities. However, there are many halls who could do more given the right financial support. Just under half of respondent halls have procedures in place to minimise their environmental impact. This represents a significant increase of over 15 per cent from 2009. 246 halls have installed solar photovoltaic panels, up from just 22 in 2009. The majority of halls have taken the most cost-effective and cheaper measures to improve their environmental impact, such as monitoring energy use (65 per cent) and installing double glazing (65 per cent). 6 per cent more halls now having double glazing compared to 2009. Other measures include installing energy saving light bulbs (63 per cent) and installing more efficient heating controls (60 per cent), the latter having risen by 10 per cent since 2009.

A small but significant proportion of halls (8 per cent) suggest their heating systems may fail in the next five years. If this proportion were grossed up to the total village hall population of c.10,000, that would represent 800 halls whose heating system may break-down in the medium term. This suggests that any grants and support for building improvements should focus on heating system renewals, and maximising the opportunities presented by renewable energy technologies.

Allied with these findings, the survey shows an increasing number of halls who have adopted modern heating technologies. The data suggests a 7 per cent reduction in the use of overhead heaters compared to 2009. A larger proportion of halls are using air source heat pumps (increasing from 0.5 per cent in 2009 to 6 per cent in 2020) and ground source heat pumps now installed in 2 per cent. These changes will result in significant reductions in carbon emissions.

A source of emissions relates to the mode of transport used to access halls. There is an observable change in the availability of weekend bus services which will affect user’s access at these times. Overall, nearly half the respondent halls stated they had seen the frequency of public transport to their community decline over the last five years, a very significant change with implications for the use and beneficial impacts that halls can have.

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Management and administration

The survey suggests 88 per cent of respondent halls are registered charities, a drop of 2 per cent from 2009. These differences may be explained by having a higher proportion of halls serving larger communities in 2020. Nearly 13 per cent of these charitable halls have adopted the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) structure. This represents an increase from 2009 and reflects the take up of this new corporate structure since its introduction in the Charities Act 2011.

Halls with policies for protecting children have increased by 16 per cent as well as those with policies for protecting vulnerable adults (up by 32 per cent). It remains the case however, that less than half of the halls surveyed have these policies in place.

Despite mobilising thousands of volunteers each year, around half of the halls had regularly experienced difficulties in recruiting new committee members. Two in five had successfully developed new services and activities in response to local need, but for hundreds a lack of volunteers had hindered these developments. Dealing with legislation and regulation was felt to place a difficult burden on volunteers. For almost 200 halls recruiting and motivating volunteers was the most important issue on which they would want training and support.

The survey shows that halls mobilise thousands of volunteers, but dealing with legislation and regulation places a burden on them.

Nearly three quarters (73 per cent) of halls have at least one volunteer booking secretary, and nearly two out of five have volunteer caretakers or handypersons. Separate research in 2019 showed that volunteering within community owned assets, like village and community halls, generates considerable wellbeing benefit. Volunteers play an important function in maintaining the buildings, carrying out small repairs, maintenance and checks within 94 per cent of respondent halls.

Many halls are also employing staff. We estimate this to be over 931 (44 per cent) of respondent halls. We estimate these halls are employing at least 650 cleaners and 314 caretakers/handypersons in full and part time roles. If similar levels of employment exist across all halls in England, then they would be employing over 3000 cleaners and nearly 1500 caretakers/ handypersons, In addition at least 10,000 individuals earn a living within respondent halls, collectively an important contribution to local economies.

Finance

Volunteer input is essential to the continuing viability of halls. Nearly three out of five respondent halls reported that their running costs totalled less than £10,000 per annum over the last two years. When inflation is factored in, the proportion of halls running on these low-cost bases is roughly the same in 2020 as 2009. However, such limited income limits capacity for investment in building improvements.

There has been a general improvement in the financial health of respondent halls and in financial planning, but also greater polarisation; around 50 per cent of respondent halls reported a small or healthy surplus made by hire charges and rental income. This compares favourably with

2009 when 46 per cent made some form of surplus. By far the largest of these income sources is hire charges. Those responding received over £19m in such fees, equivalent to £12,000 per hall. This potentially equates to £120 million per annum when grossed up to all village and community halls in England. Together with other forms of income such as fundraising, donations and rents respondent halls generated over £29 million in income per annum.

Nearly three quarters of hall committees believe that their hall will remain financially viable over the next 5 years, marginally up on results from 2009. However, it should be noted that the survey was launched before the lockdowns related to COVID-19. The picture may now be different. On a practical note, greater assistance could come in the form rate relief from local councils. Those local authorities who insist on an annual review of rate relief can reduce their own bureaucracy, and the impact on halls and their staff/volunteers, by moving to 3 or 5 year reviews.

Respondents were asked to state the value of their buildings for insurance purposes. Nearly half were valued at less than £500,000. Using assumptions about values within the ranges given, we estimate that the total value of respondent halls (for insurance purposes) is between £1bn1.5bn. However, recent research suggests that, on average, property values are 59 per cent higher than valuations based on rebuild costs. Applying such assumptions to village and community halls suggests the value of halls nationally could be in the region of £9bn-15bn.

Use of halls

The traditional activities taking place in halls continue to be popular. Private parties remain common, and demand for this is increasing. Similarly, pre-school education is a prominent use, and this is also identified as a growth activity. This may relate to the extension of services where they already existed - perhaps owing to free childcare entitlement - rather than new provision in halls. Nearly three quarters of halls are used for coffee mornings and afternoon teas, and 25 per cent of those responding have seen increases in this activity, along with further increases in community cafés and luncheon clubs. These services are likely to be making an important contribution in efforts to address loneliness and isolation among certain groups.

The use of halls for children's dance classes and fitness classes is increasing, the latter viewed as a growing activity by 50 per cent of respondents, continuing the trend from 2009. Halls are increasingly being used as an emergency response facility. Whilst halls were, generally speaking, closed during COVID-19 lockdown, some were used as a base for testing and remained open to provide essential services, such as food or drug distribution or pre-school provision for children of essential workers.

More halls report a higher proportion of the local population using their facilities than in 2009. Meeting the needs of the local community and other users is a key issue, but a quarter of halls found it difficult to do this. Common difficulties include a lack of storage and parking space, a lack of internet access, lack of volunteer capacity and limited meeting space. Despite the challenges, over 80 per cent of respondents feel their hall is changing people's lives for the better.

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Over 60 percent of halls reported that up to 25 per cent of their local residents used their hall regularly. Comparing the 2009 and 2020 data highlights an increase in the proportion of halls used by 26-50 per cent of the local population.

Evidence suggests that, while regular use by older people has increased, use by those who have a disability has decreased since 2009. Similar trends in use are apparent for BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) residents. 42 per cent of disabled/infirm users did so regularly in 2009, whilst in 2020 this has decreased to 38 per cent. For regular BAME users 10 per cent did so regularly, down from 20 per cent in 2009. This issue warrants further study to ensure that halls remain inclusive.

Working with others

Around 7 per cent of halls are used by statutory services and other bodies, for instance, to run health and wellbeing related activities such as health checks and appointments, blood donations and mental health sessions. Usage of halls by statutory and related bodies was, however, some 4 per cent lower than in 2009. Our analysis suggests that some halls have experienced a decline in use for doctor's surgeries and baby clinics, though this is based on only a small number of responses. Nearly one in ten halls are used as a venue for community businesses, who in turn support the halls through hiring out space and other financial contributions. Over 11 per cent of halls host cafés, with a further 7 per cent hosting a local post office, and 2 per cent hosting a shop. Halls provide important infrastructure for various community businesses to function.

There has been a marked increase in the proportion of halls stating that they would benefit from training and advice, compared to 2009. A slightly smaller proportion of halls had sought advice from local village hall advisers, when compared to 2009. However, satisfaction with support remains high, with as 84 per cent rating this as 'excellent' or 'good, with a decrease in those deeming the service 'inadequate' in 2020.

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