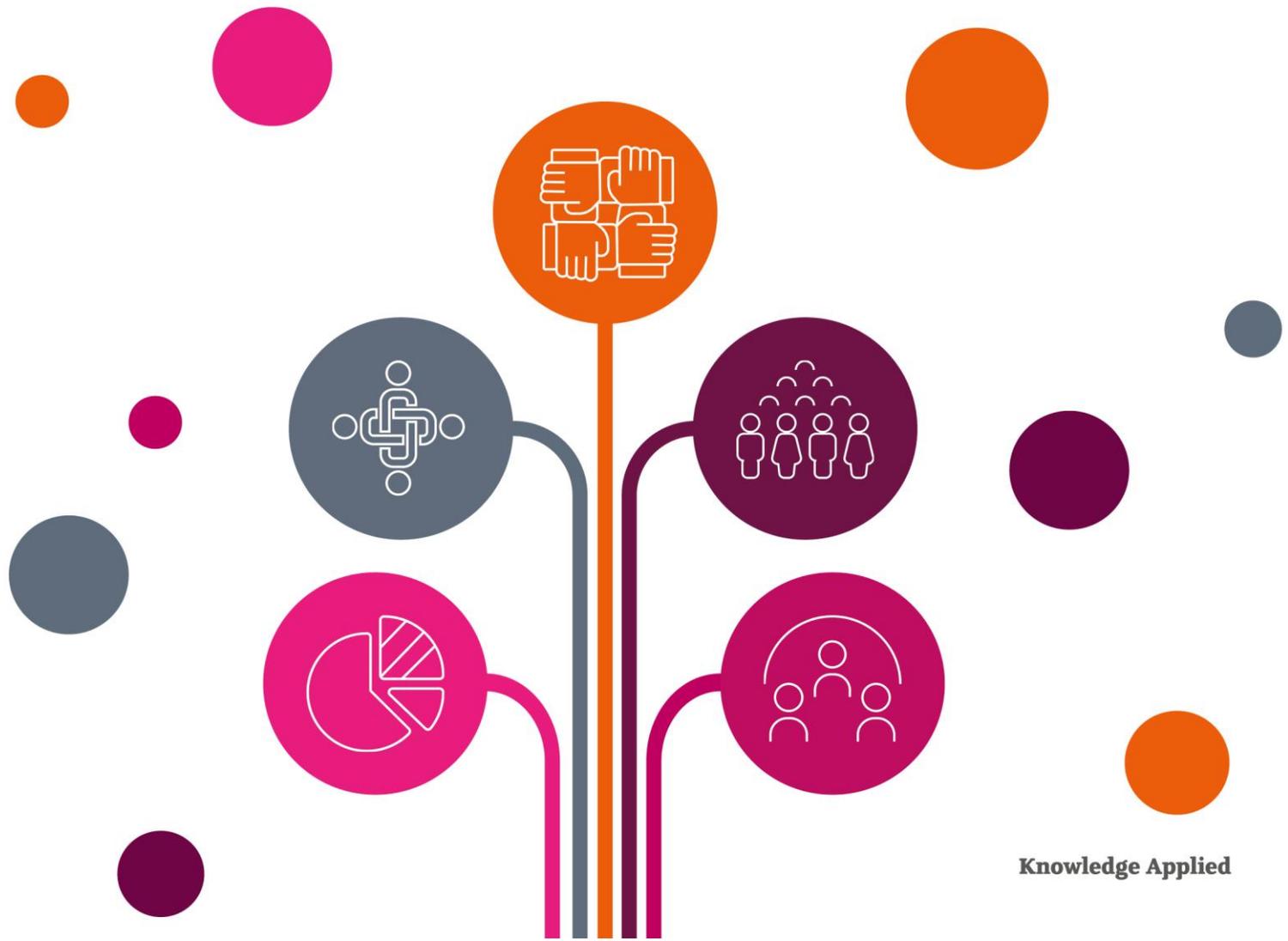


The Impact of Covid-19 on Village and Community Halls in England

Findings report

June 2021



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Findings Report

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June 2021

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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.**

Introduction

This report builds on the extensive English Village and Community Hall Survey, undertaken in early 2020.¹ This former study identified a number of important findings about the governance and management of halls, their finances, environmental impact and services, and the fabric of their buildings. However, the data captured was largely gathered before the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 took hold.

It was predicted that the pandemic would have a profound effect on community buildings and the organisations managing these. Restrictions on the use of indoor and outdoor spaces, and the services provided within them, alongside the demands placed on volunteers and users at such a difficult time, was forecast to have a major impact on these important community assets. To understand the impact of the recent Covid-19 outbreak, and the capacity of halls to recover, Sheffield Hallam University were commissioned to run a short follow-up survey with a sample of halls. This survey has sought to understand not only the impact of the pandemic, but also the role of different support packages in helping halls weather the storm, the risks and challenges faced, and the support needs of halls in the immediate moment and coming months.

The following report presents the key findings from the survey. First, we outline the methods employed, the scale of responses and the margin of error in our final dataset. We then provide key insights in three sub-sections, focusing on: 1) the general impact of Covid-19 on hall governance and finances, among other things, 2) the risks and problems faced by halls as restrictions are lifted and some normality returns to their operations, 3) the kinds of support that have proved valuable, and will prove valuable in the future.

1.1. Survey methods

The extensive surveying in 2020, alongside the immediate pressures on halls, meant this follow-up survey had to be much shorter. An online survey was designed comprising 35 questions, and this was emailed to respondents from the 2020 survey. This has enabled us to assess potential changes in specific variables over the preceding year. The survey ran from 1 March 2021 to 30 April 2021. Once the survey was closed, the data was cleaned, duplicate cases were removed, and the final dataset was analysed in SPSS and Mapinfo.

1.2. The sample and margin of error

The final dataset contains 1,017 responses from individual halls (with 295 of these being partial responses). This response rate represents 10 per cent of all known village and community halls in England. The calculated margin of error for the typical variable,

¹ Archer et al (2020) *The English Village and Community Hall Survey 2020*. Accessed at: <https://acre.org.uk/cms/resources/village-hall-survey-report-2020-final-digital-edition.pdf>

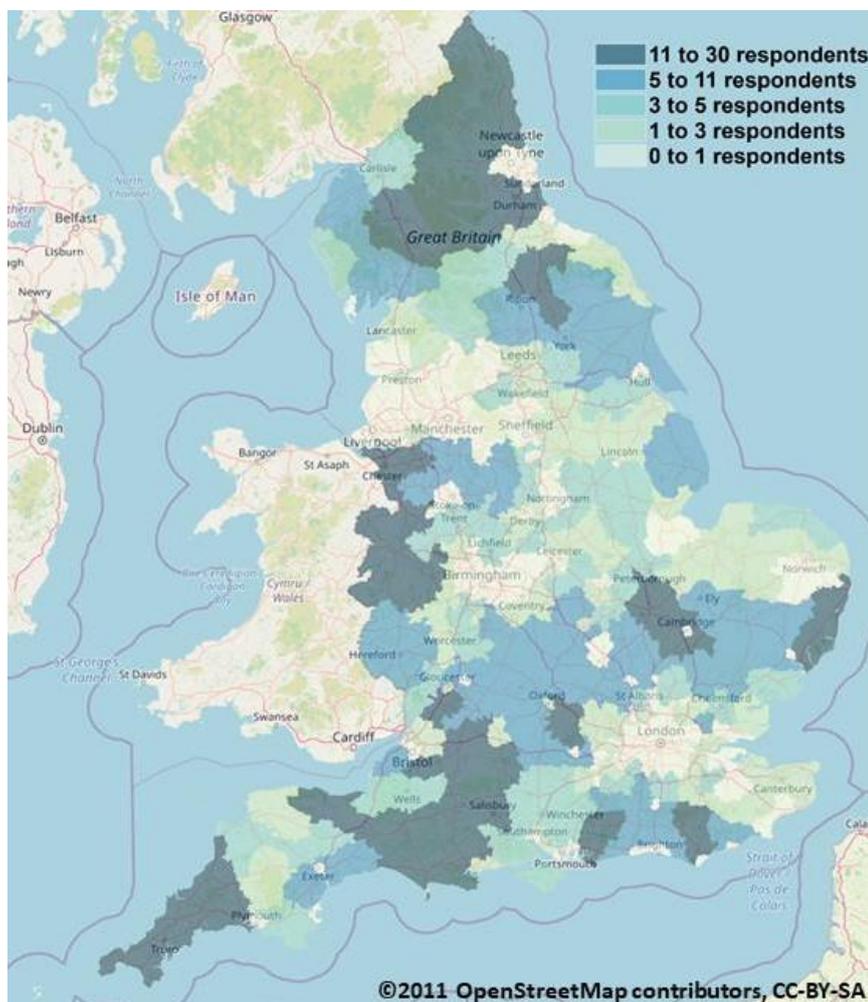
with basic assumptions about distribution of data, is ± 2.5 per cent at the 95 per cent level. This means that 95 per cent of the time we would expect that the true value lies within a range of 2.5 per cent either side of the reported value. Comparisons with the 2020 survey data are possible, given the similarities between respondents in the 2020 and 2021 survey. For instance, in terms of the size of population served by halls, the two samples are very similar (Table 1). The 2021 survey also achieved a relatively even distribution of responses in terms of geography (Figure 1).

Table 1: Populations served by respondent halls, 2021 and 2020 samples

	2021 %	2020 %
Up to 300	16.0	15.9
301 – 600	19.0	21.1
601 – 1,000	16.2	15
1,001 – 2,000	16.4	16.6
2,001 – 4,000	15.3	15.1
4,001 – 10,000	11.8	10.4
More than 10,001	5.3	5.8
Total	100.0	100

Base: 856 halls

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents (number of respondent halls)



The Impact of Covid-19

2

The following section assesses responses to the survey to present a picture of the impacts of Covid-19 on halls through 2020 and early 2021. The section starts by looking at the operational status of halls over the past year, before exploring how the pandemic has affected their finances, improvement plans, and the use and services offered by halls.

2.1. Operations through the pandemic

Just over 40 per cent of respondent halls to the 2021 survey suggested they had continued to operate, at least in part, during the pandemic. Nearly two thirds of these respondents had opened all or part of their halls, except during lockdowns. There is evidence that some halls have, albeit in part, remained functional even during the lockdowns. Approximately 85 halls responded in this way, suggesting they were being used for some essential provision or services. **As discussed further below, halls have played a valuable role in local action and service provision during the pandemic, not least in providing a base for emergency food provision and space for vital childcare in the second and third lockdowns.**

While some halls have opened during the pandemic, the majority have in fact been largely closed. When asked if they had continued to operate during the course of the pandemic, 59 per cent of halls said 'No'. Interrogating these responses suggests that over 86 per cent of these had been closed throughout, except for essential maintenance/security checks, but that they did anticipate reopening in future.

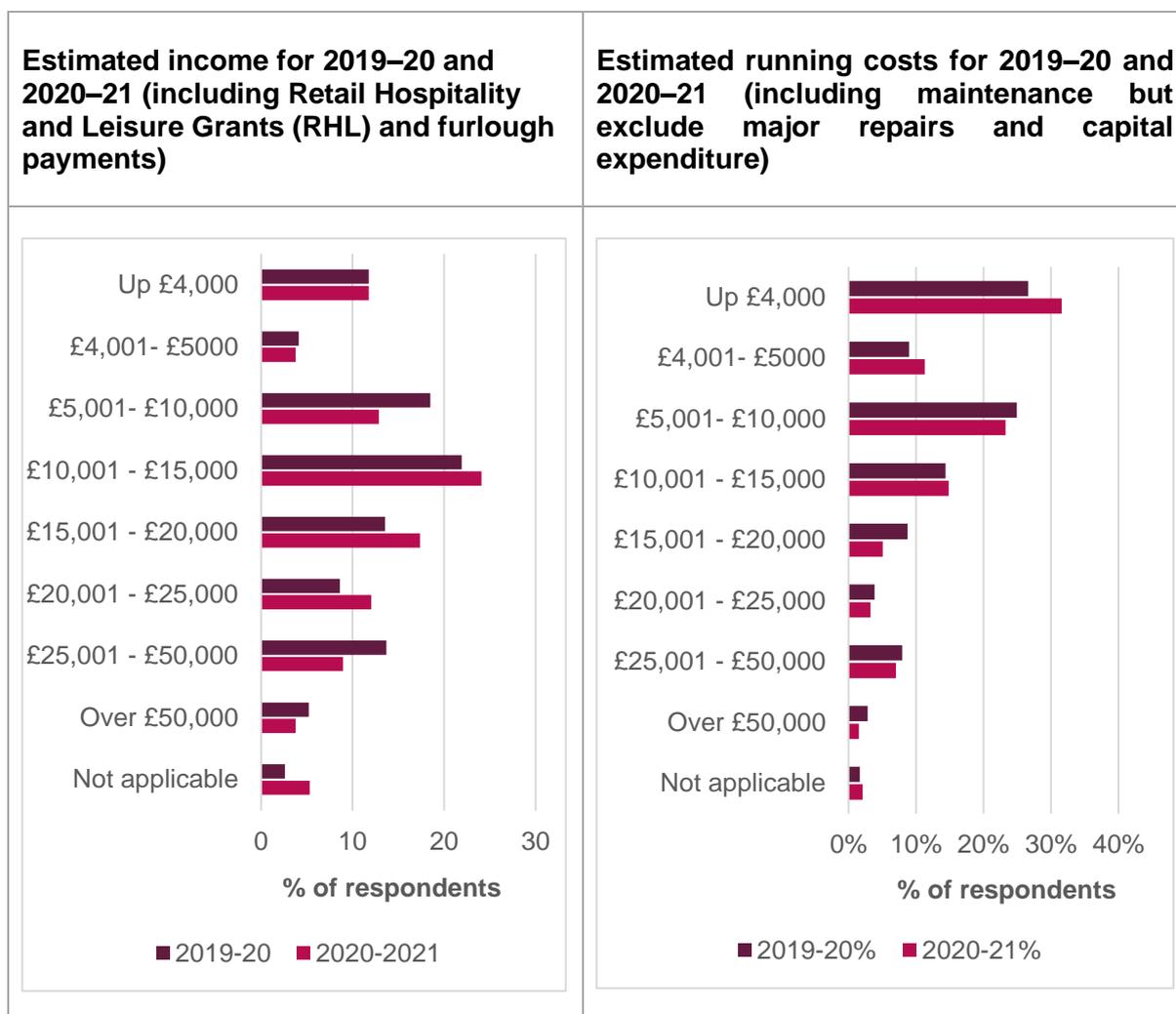
Despite these positive signs of future provision, there are a worrying number of halls that have been closed and do not anticipate reopening. Within our sample this accounts for 1.4 per cent of respondents, and this may be a minimum figure given it was only presented as a response option to halls that had not continued to operate during the pandemic. **When we gross up to the total number of village and community halls in England, this could equate to the closure of some 140 halls across the country. This is a critical warning sign and suggests some halls need immediate support to continue.**

2.2. Financial impacts and health

Changes in income and expenditure have been significant, though patterns in this are perhaps not as obvious as one might expect. The most obvious change has been that fewer halls are generating large revenues (Figure 2). Approximately 19 per cent of halls had income over £25,000 in 2019–20, but this fell to 13 per cent of halls for 2020–21. It is important to note that these figures exclude various grant support and furlough payments, so clearly this evidences the lost income from hiring, fee-earning service provision etc.

The picture on running costs is slightly different. There is a marked increase in the proportion of halls with low running costs in 2020–21 (less than £5,000), with fewer halls reporting higher running costs in 2020–21 (over £25,000). This is to be expected given the restrictions imposed through the lockdown.

Figure 2: Changes in income and expenditure on running costs



Base: 778 and 730 halls

Respondents were asked about the amount of support they had received through Retail, Hospitality and Leisure (RHL) Grants, and discretionary or other Covid-19 grants. The total amount received, from the 633 respondents completing this question, equated to £7.99m, or £12,600 per hall. **Crucially, our 2020 survey established that halls, on average, generated £12,000 in fee income per year, so there is a match between the support provided through the pandemic and the significant lost income due to the restrictions.** Reflecting on the potential closure of halls outlined above, perhaps financial pressures are not the only factor in explaining this.

When asked how the financial health of their hall had changed over the last year, there was divergence in views. For some (33 per cent) their finances had either improved or improved a lot, whereas for a similar proportion (34 per cent) their finances had either worsened or worsened a lot. Explaining some of this divergence is the size of the community served. When we look at responses in relation to this variable, we see a clear pattern: **halls serving larger populations are much more likely to have experienced worsening financial health over the preceding year.** Using the null hypothesis that there is no association between population size served and financial health, we applied a Phi coefficient test and found a significant negative association,

$\Phi = -.259, p=.000$. As evidence for this, 79 per cent of halls serving populations over 4,000 in size identify their financial situation as having worsened, much higher than the proportion of halls serving populations of less than 4,000 people (45 per cent).

Table 2: The relationship between size of community served and perceived financial health

		Worsened	Improved	Total
Smaller population served (<4,000)	Count	181	225	406
	% within smaller population served	44.6%	55.4%	100.0%
Larger population served (>4,000)	Count	67	18	85
	% within larger population served	78.8%	21.2%	100.0%

Base: 491 halls

The size of community served may be a proxy for other causally operative factors. It may be associated with the scale of a hall's income, their business models and/or diversity of income streams. Exploring this further, we looked at perceptions of financial health in relation to whether, in 2020, halls had received any income through enterprise or trading. We sought to match as many 2021 respondents as possible to their responses in 2020, and to identify those that provided answers on both their income streams and financial health.

Those stating that their financial position had worsened over the previous year were almost twice as likely to have been engaged in trading or enterprise than those who said their financial position had improved. This suggests that there are factors associated with the nature of hall's income and their business models, in addition to the size of community served, which may explain varying perceptions of financial health.

Over a quarter of halls (26 per cent) have needed to use their reserves to meet their running costs over the previous year. While over 25 per cent of respondents had seen their reserves reduced in 2020–21, just under a third (32 per cent) had seen their reserves increase. **This differentiation suggests there is a cohort of halls in worsening financial health, but another cohort with greater resources than they have previously seen.** It is possible that a number of halls have put some or all of their Covid-19 grants into their reserves. Exploring this further, we looked at variation in grants and payments by the level of free reserves held by halls. Those stating that their reserves had 'reduced' or 'reduced a lot' had received approximately £4,000 less in Covid-19 grants and payments, compared to those who stated their reserves had 'increased' or 'increased a lot'.

Again, this relationship may be linked to hall size or size of population served. Among those serving smaller populations (of less than 4,000 people), 22 per cent suggested their reserves have reduced to some extent, compared to 38 per cent for those serving populations greater than 4,000.

There is a substantial difference in the perceived financial health of those halls receiving RHL, discretionary or other Covid-19 grants and furlough payments, and those halls that did not. Of those halls for whom we can establish no such grants had been received, 80 per cent saw their financial situation as having worsened. Less than

30 per cent of halls receiving these grants and payments saw their finances being worse than previously seen.

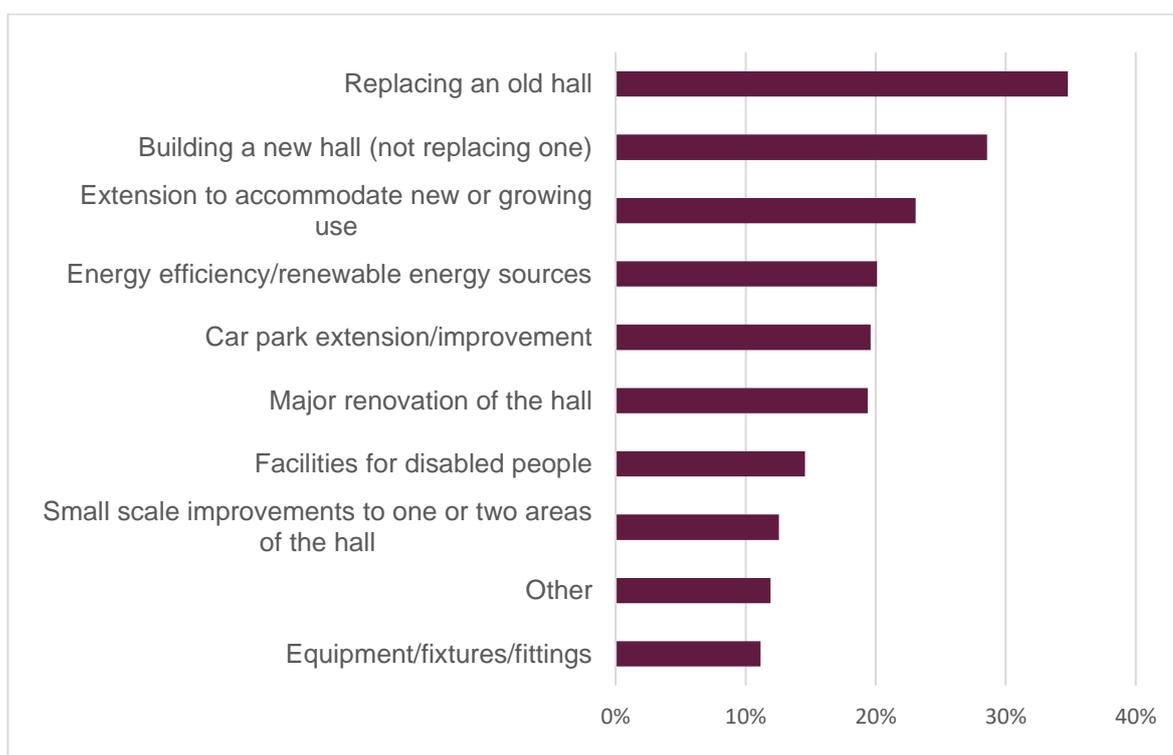
A minority of halls will have drawn on furlough payments, given that only 17 per cent of the sample had previously employed staff. **For these halls, nine per cent had decreased their staffing hours as a result of Covid-19. This adds to evidence below about potential impacts of the pandemic on the internal capacity within some halls.**

There is greater optimism about the financial outlook. While 33 per cent of halls felt their hall's financial position had worsened over the previous year, only 19 per cent felt this would continue over the coming three years. Interestingly, there does not seem to be a strong association between responses on financial outlook and population size served.

2.3. Impacts on hall improvement and services

Of the different improvements that were planned to halls, there are disparities between those still to be undertaken and those that are no longer going ahead. Across the sample we identified 151 halls where at least one type of improvement was previously planned but no longer being carried out. **Of those halls planning to replace their old hall, over a third had abandoned these plans. Similarly, a high proportion of those planning to build a new hall were now not planning to do so.** Lower proportions were evident for other types of improvement, but still over 10 per cent of those planning upgrades to equipment, fixtures and fittings will now not undertake this work. It is important to note numerical differences also, as well as the variation in proportions. Over 350 of the halls surveyed had - prior to Covid-19 - planned some improvements to equipment, fixtures and fittings, while only 15 planned to replace their old hall. Hence, there is a *quantitative difference* in these planned improvements, and how many will not now go ahead.

Figure 3: Proportion of planned improvements no longer going ahead as scheduled



Base: 151 halls

Exploring the responses of those 151 halls that had planned improvements but no longer intended to complete the work is revealing. **These halls were more likely to state that in 2020–21 they had used their reserves to meet their running costs. 33 per cent of this sub-sample had used reserves during the pandemic, as opposed to only 26 per cent in the wider sample.** This suggests that trade-off decisions are being made, where halls needing to use their reserves for running costs may be cancelling planned improvements. This insight may help target future grant and financial support. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 38 per cent of halls no longer undertaking planned improvements perceive their financial position to have worsened, 5 percentage points more than the sample as a whole. **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.**

2.4. Changes in the use of halls and their services

A significant proportion of halls have been used over the last year as part of the response to Covid-19. Approximately 15 per cent of halls responding had been used in support of NHS activities or other community services. Nearly half of these halls had been involved in some form of food or delivery provision and/or foodbank service. Some of these were still running in early 2021; as one hall put it, they were still making *'emergency food boxes...300 made up for the community and still ongoing but scaled down.'* Many other halls had hosted Covid-19 testing centres, vaccination days, blood donation sessions, and pop-up shops and post offices, while others had been involved in making protective equipment and 'scrubs'.

When analysing this data, it becomes clear that halls have played a key role in local responses to Covid-19 - serving to underline the vital role they play in delivery of services. Given the role performed by halls in emergencies such as Covid-19, there is a case for additional resources to be offered where additional responsibilities are borne.

Our survey asked halls about new activities and services planned for when halls can reopen fully. Responses focus on new classes, particularly those relating to sport, yoga and other physical activities, as well as those targeting children and young people. For a small number of halls that are operating as new venues, having been developed over the course of the pandemic, this issue is particularly significant as they seek to maximise usage of a new building.

'We have a brand new hall, completed last summer. We have a wedding booked and returning fitness activities. Wine classes, lunches for elderly and WI will recommence. We plan more fitness classes, film nights, wine classes, promote Kids Club, M&Toddlers, sports events...'

Financial imperatives are clear in hall responses, with significant mention of fundraising events. This correlates with responses below about halls' biggest challenge being a decrease in fundraising. As one respondent put it, in reference to planned activities, they will be organising *'just lots of community fundraising events.'*

Perhaps equally important is the sense that halls are ever more aware of their role in bringing people together after significant time apart. When asked about future plans, *'becoming more of a community venue'* and *'trying to increase the amount of local people involve[d]'*, are just some of the responses that exemplify this. Halls are planning *'functions for community get-togethers'* and they are also investing, or have invested, capital resources to expand their use:

'A new Conference Room has been developed which should encourage greater diversity in use.'

'We refurbished our main hall during lockdown. The new space lends itself to more community activities which we hope to encourage when allowed.'

'Major redevelopment and extensions planned to start later this year SUBJECT TO FUNDING.'

Some of these investments and widening of activities and services are premised on halls trying to broaden and diversify their user base. This is a recurring theme in their responses:

'We need to attract new users to take the place of those we have lost. Not all users have rebooked yet.'

'[We are] looking to try to start new activities for younger people, get a website designed, [and] promote the hall more widely.'

Alongside this desire to attract new users, a number of halls aim to target vulnerable users, and to address some of the impacts of the pandemic on older people. As one hall noted, they will *'create a new social care focus and support for the old and vulnerable.'* Others will have *'increased social activities for older members of the community.'*

A number of halls were, prior to the pandemic, used for educational purposes. Among respondent halls 192 were previously used for pre-school provision, 96 for before and after school activities, and 31 for formal schooling. When these schools were asked if these services reopened when permitted to, only 71 halls said no. **Clearly, alongside their contribution to NHS services and other community provisions, halls have played a key role in childcare provision to key workers and other parents.**

There is evidence in open responses that a small proportion of childcare and educational services have been lost and will not return. At least four respondents noted how out-of-school provision, pre-school, or formal schooling was to end in their hall. Halls recognise this is a significant issue not least because it can be an important source of income:

'[The] after-school club has stopped trading due to Covid, which was the biggest income for the centre prior to Covid.'

Other services or activities appear not to be returning as halls reopen. While evidence above suggests that new classes, sports and clubs are being planned by some halls, perhaps more are being closed or discontinued. Open responses suggest that numerous classes and clubs folded as a result of Covid-19 and will not return. 29 respondents specifically mention yoga classes and similar numbers identify Pilates and dance classes that will not return immediately. Specific issues are likely to be experienced with clubs and sessions for older people, where it is expected users will not return quickly and in significant numbers. This was exemplified by one hall's response:

'Many of our groups are attended by older residents. Some have said they will not return, others may not until vaccination is complete. A few groups will return with much fewer numbers.'

There does seem to be a differentiation made by some respondents in terms of those activities which are making a delayed return and those which have folded. One respondent noted how their *'Whist Club has folded and Line Dancing is likely to fold'*,

but that '*other groups (stitch craft, quilting and indoor bowls) [will be] resuming in the autumn.*' It is difficult to establish a pattern in those activities that seem unlikely to return and those which are simply being put on hold.

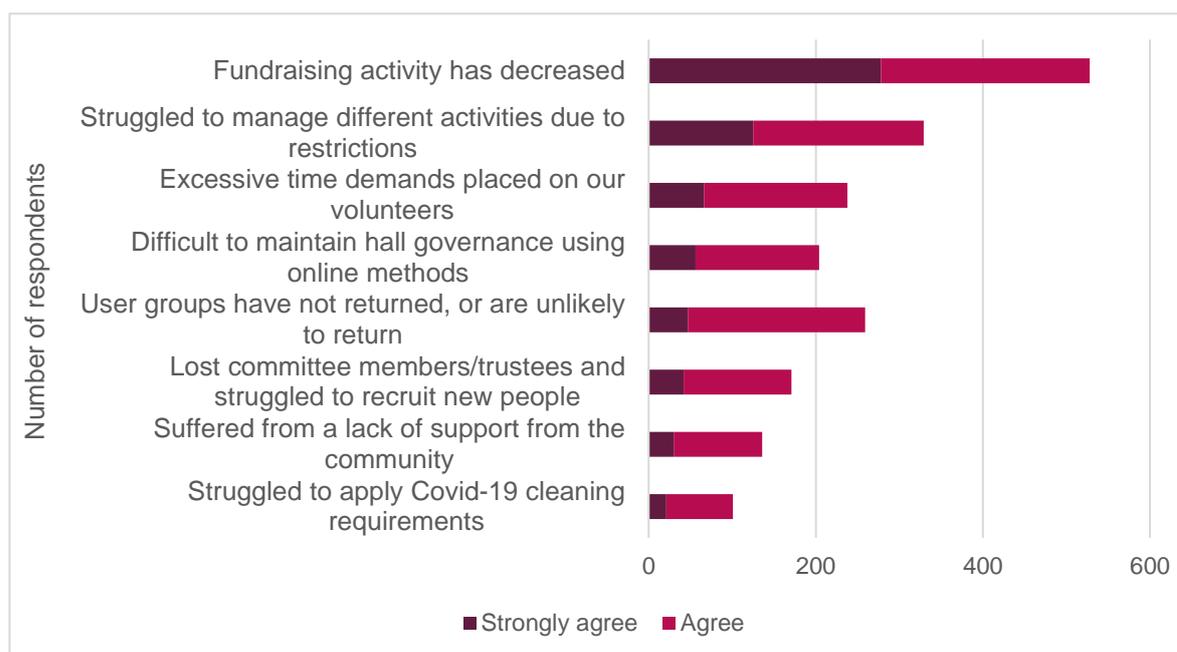
There is a role for ACRE here as halls seek to promote their services and diversify the activities undertaken in their buildings. **We recommend that the ACRE Network undertakes work nationally to promote the availability of halls and their uses to different audiences and user groups.**

Perceived challenges and risks

Our survey sought to capture and assess some of the specific challenges halls have faced as a result of the pandemic (Figure 4). Of particular note is how social distancing measures and the enforced closure of halls has hampered fundraising. **72 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their fundraising has decreased in the last year, and that this was a significant problem. The connections here with perceived worsening financial health are obvious.** Alongside this, halls have struggled with planning and managing activities under frequently changing rules and restrictions, and how this has placed significant burdens on staff and, notably, volunteers. Nearly a third of respondent halls agree with the statement, 'There have been excessive time demands placed on our volunteers.'

Other problems are also apparent. 28 per cent of halls found it difficult to maintain hall governance using online methods. Nearly a quarter of halls say they have lost committee members or trustees, and are struggling to recruit new members. This is perhaps not as stark an issue as might be expected given that in our 2020 survey, 50 per cent of halls stated they regularly had 'difficulty recruiting new committee members.' It may be the case that other problems (such as fundraising) have become more prominent than issues relating to trustee/member recruitment. Back in 2020 only 16 per cent of respondent halls stated they lacked support from the local community. In 2021, this was 18 per cent and within the margin of error. Again, this is perhaps not as significant a change as we might expect. Worries about the return of user groups are prevalent, however, with over a third of halls agreeing this was a problem they faced.

Figure 4: The problems faced in the previous year



Base: 735–739 responses for each response option.

Open responses to questions on the impact of the pandemic reveal some of the nuances of the challenges faced. These fall largely within the themes of governance and operational challenges, financial challenges, and challenges associated with volunteers.

3.1. Governance and operations

Recent restrictions had not only closed village halls for users but also for their committees and sub-groups. Shifting to online forms of communication has posed additional challenges to the individuals involved. New communication procedures have had to be developed and technological capabilities acquired in order to facilitate remote meetings. Challenges have also been unfolding in relation to workloads and coping with the new requirements and working realities:

‘I have found that holding remote meetings with committee members has been challenging and demanding.’

‘So many things to consider, especially in relation to communication with our users and putting in appropriate arrangements with staff.’

These difficulties have also caused some halls to be less responsive and agile, even though the pandemic has required rapid responses and decision-making, particularly in the early days of the outbreak. Some halls have reacted to this by scrutinising their governance structures and adapting these. As one hall noted, *‘The pandemic has made us review the Hall Rules of Management to reduce the size of the Management Committee and streamline the decision-making process.’*

For others, these types of adjustment have not been possible, and they have been limited in their ability to act and react: *‘The committee has been restricted in its activities by people shielding and/or self-isolating, plus one member not having any online capability.’*

A major problem for halls has been the lack of clear guidance and the changing rules and regulations. Respondents suggested some of the decisions made through the course of the pandemic increased workload and decreased effectiveness of their own governance processes: *'We have done a lot of planning but with the constant changes it has made this process very fraught.'*

The increased effort needed to develop ideas and set-up procedures left many village halls unable to respond. Not all halls had sufficient human resources to understand and incorporate all the regulations and guidance released. Others, however, were able to assimilate this and act quickly. As one respondent noted, *'I spend part of my working day looking at [governmental] guidance so I am used to interpreting it.'* However, the ability to respond to changing regulations meant that many village halls chose to leave their doors closed.

Respondents generally emphasise the very high levels of uncertainty around future activity and use. In the early stages of the pandemic, there had been no distinct rules or guidelines addressing their unique nature and role in communities. Not being subject to distinct regulations, but being dependent on the good will of volunteers and support of umbrella organisations, may have limited what halls could do in response to the outbreak.

The frustration created by this may present significant risks for future hall governance. Uncertainty about the future may impede good governance, recruitment of new members and forward planning. New issues are emerging in terms of funding and fundraising, which is taking on a renewed significance, as respondents are seeking more information and training to handle this.

A number of risks associated with these developments are apparent. The retention of current volunteers and recruitment of new ones is a particular challenge of which halls are cognisant:

'I fear that because most of our committee members are retirement age we will struggle to regain enthusiasm for managing the hall.'

3.2. Financial challenges

Respondent halls highlighted how the emergency Covid-19 grants had, to some extent, compensated for their loss of income, but also in some cases helped improve their financial position (for instance, as unused grants were added to hall reserves). It is unclear how halls have used their Covid-19 grants and payments, and whether for a number it has simply boosted reserves. For those in a better financial position, the opportunities presented by the pandemic, with halls closed for significant periods, has enabled them to undertake various improvements. Halls reported efforts to redecorate, improve and upgrade their premises while the building was empty.

Generally, the main financial impact of the pandemic has been a reduction in income, but this is also intertwined with significantly less internal capacity and resources:

'The pandemic has been a disaster for the hall as we have lost members who helped with the running of the hall and used most of our reserves.'

This short-term financial hit is likely to have a long-term negative impact on the financial stability of halls:

'Although finances are reasonably OK at the moment thanks to the government grant, it is difficult to say what the long-term picture will look like as nobody knows how long it will take for people to have the confidence to book the larger events'

that generate a large portion of our income. The income from the routine bookings by groups and clubs don't cover all our running costs and over time this will deplete our reserves.'

Respondents particularly highlight concerns about the return of activities to halls, as social gatherings are the main source of income for these venues:

'We spent a large part of the government grant on preparing the building to reopen. 60% of our groups promised to return in August; they did not. We made £250 pcm in September and October; we need £1.2k per month to meet our bills.'

'Our community is pretty elderly and although our hall and events are usually well supported, we know from talking to people that it is going to take some time to get everyone out and joining in. Having been isolated for over a year, quite a few are nervous about rejoining life again so it is going to take time and effort to persuade them to take part in our planned events [...] Time will tell if we are successful.'

The above emphasises the need for further bridging grants in order to facilitate a financial survival of village halls, in particular for these to overcome the initial *'reopening period when revenues may still be under normal levels, but operating costs [are] fixed.'* **We recommend urgent attention is given to some form of bridging funding or finance, so halls can survive this period of uncertainty.**

Again, the uncertainties on how regulations will change and evolve, which rules will be eased in the coming weeks and months, and the change in usage of halls is difficult to predict. Therefore, several respondents were reluctant to make optimistic statements about the future. As one hall succinctly put it, *'Until we open fully after 17th May, we cannot be sure how our finances will be affected.'*

3.3. Challenges associated with volunteers

Open responses highlight the urgent and increasing need for more community input in terms of volunteers contributing to running halls, as well as users engaging in activities. Although this issue may have been present before the pandemic, it is still a pressing challenge as lots of volunteers are elderly and vulnerable to Covid-19.

The short-term impact of the pandemic has, generally speaking, been an increase in the workload of volunteers running halls. New regulations and restrictions, including new health and safety measures, required in-depth attention and assessment:

'Some Committee members are Key Workers which has put a strain on the other Committee members to cover all the work and tasks necessary to meet ongoing maintenance and running of the hall, and to adhere to the changing rules and regulations.'

'We are fortunate in having an experienced and committed Hall Manager who, working with the Chair of the management committee, has organised all measures relating to lockdowns and reopenings in an effective and safe manner. However, it has placed a lot of pressure on these two individuals.'

For some halls this additional burden was directly related to their ability to open:

'Our Hall has been closed during the pandemic due to the cost and difficulties of keeping it open.'

Increases in workload have also arisen as some halls took the opportunity presented by the pandemic to undertake maintenance and refurbishment activity. The demands

on volunteers in these halls may have been significant. As one respondent noted, *'volunteers have supported refurbishment activity to [the extent of] over 1,000 hours of labour and skill.'*

There are great concerns about whether and how volunteers may return. It is expected that especially older individuals may not take up their voluntary commitment again: *'Although they have all had both vaccinations, there seems to be a reluctance to get involved again.'* In addition to losing former volunteers, the last year has *'not been a good time to recruit more volunteers!'* Clearly, the lack of volunteers presents an existential threat to some halls: *'But we have no idea if our previous users or volunteers will return. If they don't we shall close permanently.'*

Nonetheless, it is still early days concerning the reopening and reviving of public life. Respondents' key sentiment is one of uncertainty. There is no information or experience available to assess whether and how people may return:

'We do not yet know how it has affected our volunteer base as many are in the vulnerable category.'

'We are unsure if our volunteers will return.'

Support received and required

Survey respondents were asked a number of questions about the support they had received through the pandemic, and the support they require in future. In the following section we use a mixture of quantitative data and analysis of open responses to explore these issues further. We look first at the support received and the perceived value of this, before assessing halls' preferred options for future support.

4.1. The type and value of grants received

As noted above, RHL and other Covid-19 related grants and payments have played a key role in stabilising the income of halls through the pandemic. Open response questions shed more light on the value of these to halls, with the majority greatly appreciative of the support. In the short term these funds helped many village halls ride out the uncertainty:

'The grants ...received have saved [the hall] from financial difficulty, but [we] have suffered as a result of a loss of a year's trading'.

'The local funding has been invaluable to the hall's survival.'

'Government grants have been fantastic.'

Although not many respondents explicitly stated how they have experienced the accessibility of these grants, the fact that lots of halls have been able to obtain these may indicate that the barriers to access were low:

'We were astonished to be asked to apply for a grant and by how easy it was to obtain one.'

Most sources for grants have been governmental funds such as the Small Business Grant Fund (SBGF) and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund (RHLGF), and these have been critical to halls' survival. The role of local authorities and parish councils is also significant, and some halls attribute beneficial support to them:

'We have received solid financial support from the council without which the hall would probably have closed for good... Without this lifeline it isn't worth thinking about the alternative outcome.'

Various forms of support have enabled halls to manage financial pressures, not least in the form of rate relief. The importance of this, alongside other grants, should not be underestimated:

'[We have been] provided a grant of £10,000 to small businesses [and have been] eligible for Small Business Rate Relief. This represents 3 years of expenditure on running costs and has transformed the finances of the charitable organisation.'

'We qualified for business rate relief, two grants from government, and an increased annual grant from the Parish Council. This puts us in a better place than we were anticipating before the Covid pandemic. It allowed us to make a couple of expensive repairs and to plan for some minor purchases which will improve our hall.'

Therefore, grants have not only been used to help village halls survive a year of closure, but provided the stability and certainty upon which capital investments can be made.

Grant funding did not receive universal approval however, and it had created some ethical dilemmas for halls. One respondent highlighted that *'whilst very welcome'*, the lack of means-testing had meant the funding offered *'more than covered our loss of income and left us in a better financial position.'* This led respondents to reflect on the grant allocation process:

'We have found that the formulaic Covid grants paid automatically to us are likely to exceed our financial losses from Covid and so have repaid some amounts to avoid making an inappropriate profit from them.'

ACRE has argued that surplus funds could be put into reserves since there may be future impacts from Covid-19 that are not yet fully understood. Future local lockdowns, an outbreak in the community, or a requirement to take a particular action to safeguard vulnerable people are just some examples which may have resource implications.

Despite these dilemmas, many halls are clearly still struggling financially, despite government support, and will require further financial contributions to bridge the difficult period between reopening and returning to previous levels of income.

4.2. Advice and support accessed

For two fifths of respondents, ACRE member organisations were the main sources of advice and support during the pandemic. For around a quarter, ACRE were the primary source of information and advice. This advice has been valued by halls, as articulated by numerous respondents:

'The support from ACRE is invaluable.'

'ACRE has been invaluable through the pandemic via their reopening the Hall updates.'

'Community Action Northumberland, which is part of the ACRE Network, has been excellent.'

Since February 2020, 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. 98 per cent of those respondents receiving this support felt it was 'good' or 'excellent'. This is markedly higher than responses in the 2020 National Village Hall Survey where 84 per cent rated the service 'good or 'excellent'. This suggests that ACRE Network member services have made a valued contribution during the pandemic, as halls have grappled with the challenges and risks outlined above.

Nonetheless, these challenges remain. Although respondents emphasise the quality and importance of the information ACRE prepares and publishes, there is still a need for updated information and guidance. This is particularly acute in respect to changing regulations and the easing of restrictions.

'[We need] complete clarity from ACRE in terms of the hiring of the hall, i.e. what are we allowed to do and what not under government restrictions.'

Specialist advice on issues such as risk assessments is taking on renewed importance, and accessing this support is difficult as resources are squeezed:

'ACRE were helpful, but it would be great if halls could be offered a free service by a specialist in this field to bring all our risk assessments and health and safety policies up to date.'

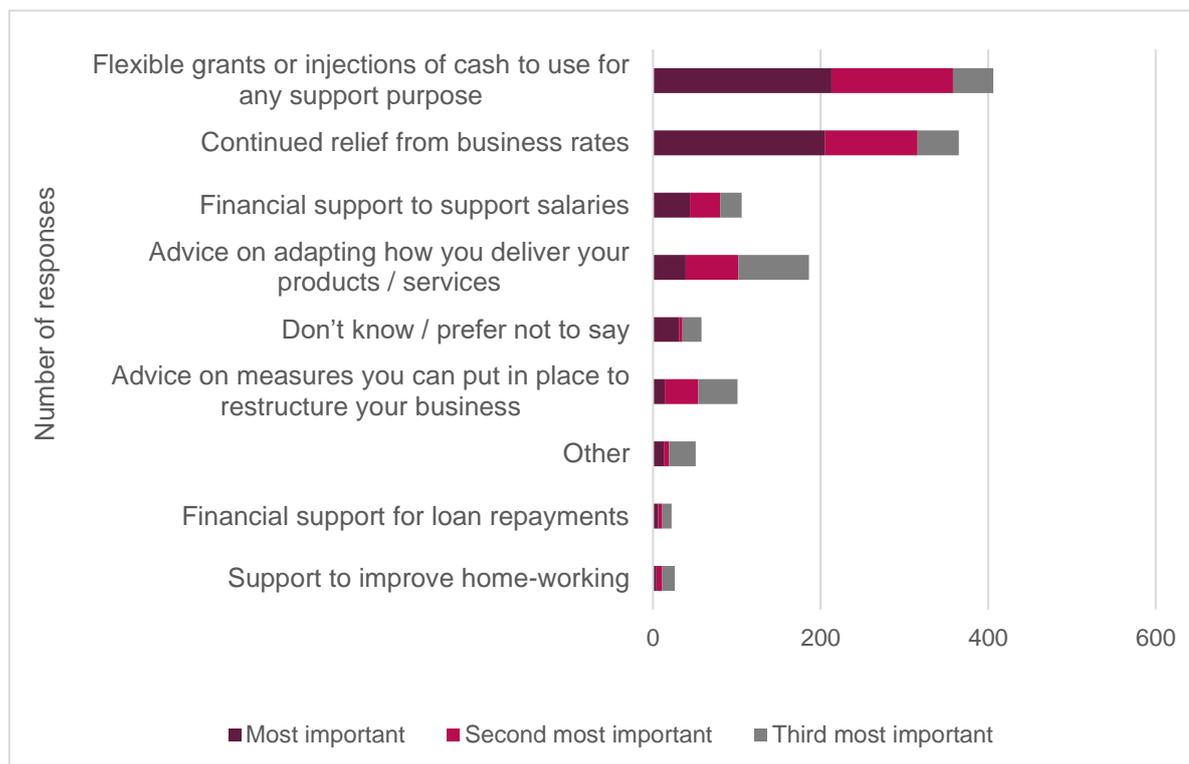
Hence, one of the key ongoing support needs for halls is information and advice in meeting a frequently changing context, where public health concerns are at the forefront of their thinking, and where halls have limited resources to process information and adapt quickly. **To provide this support, ACRE Network members need to be adequately resourced to deliver their support services, and we recommend that this issue is reviewed.**

4.3. Preferred options for future support

The survey asked respondents which forms of support are most important to them as they respond and recover from Covid-19. Respondents were asked to rank these support types by the three most important. Figure 5 shows this data, ordered by the options deemed the single most important. **Flexible grants alongside continued relief from business rates were seen as the most important by over a third of respondents (37 and 36 per cent respectively). In aggregate, 71 per cent of respondents deemed flexible grants to be in their top three most important support types. 64 per cent of respondents had continued business rate relief in their top three.**

On the basis of these findings, we recommend urgent attention is given to forms of flexible funding, especially to bridge the forthcoming period of uncertainty. We also recommend that halls across England benefit from the mandatory and full discretionary rate relief. Policy mechanisms should be used to ensure this happens at the local authority level. The details of what grants would be most valuable in future, and what they would be used for, are discussed in more detail below.

Figure 5: Preferred forms of support (the three most important)



Base: 569 responses selecting at least the most important form of support

Further analysis has been undertaken to assess whether the future support needs of halls align with the wider sector. Specific questions in our survey replicated those used in the Community Business Market Survey² undertaken in mid-2020. **With the exception of business rate relief, the most important support needs of halls are the same as those in the wider community business sector.** In place of business rate relief, other community businesses had advice on restructuring their business as a key support need. The similarity in responses suggests there be policy and funding interventions that can be generically applied but nonetheless valued by different types of community business and voluntary organisation.

4.4. The nature and form of future support

Looking at the open responses of halls reveals how the support they require is diverse, and varies depending on their type and experience over the previous year. Nonetheless, it is possible to summarise these support needs into three main categories:

1. Community involvement:
 - Needing more volunteers.
 - Needing new trustees to take on work and responsibility.
 - Needing the community to revive village halls and use their offer as soon as restrictions are lifted.

² Community Business Market Survey (2020). Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Accessed at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CBM-Initial-Analysis_Final_updated-1.pdf

2. Financial support:
 - To maintain and improve buildings.
 - To help cover reduced income streams.
 - To allow village halls to survive in the long term.

3. Information and training:
 - Receiving general advice.
 - Particular advice concerning legal obligations and Covid-related regulations.
 - Special advice on further topics such as professional assistance on recruiting volunteers, health and safety regulations and requirements, and funding bids.

1. Community involvement

A lack of community input was identified by most respondents. The decreasing involvement of local residents in voluntary activities caused great fears for some and increased the workload of those volunteers still active. Additionally, several organisations have relied heavily on older volunteers, which has caused concerns about future governance arrangements.

The age of volunteers creates an ongoing need to recruit younger members, and to free existing members from roles they may have occupied for a long time:

'We need trustees and younger people (below 70) to continue to run the hall successfully.'

'Volunteers as current trustees feel trapped [in] their roles.'

The pandemic has amplified these issues. Volunteers' increased probability of severe illness with Covid-19, and likelihood of needing to shield over the last 14 months, has created a range of operational and governance challenges. Key individuals have not been able to support their local hall in ways they previously had, and there remain ongoing concerns about whether these individuals will return:

'It depends on whether they will want to come out when life returns, will they feel safe, will they want to bother? The future is still very uncertain for the older generation.'

'The pandemic has made them fearful.'

Respondents reflected on not being able to access younger volunteers to take over responsibility in managing and running the hall. It is assumed that by recruiting younger trustees and members, halls would not only secure the future governance of the hall but also develop more attractive service offers for younger people - changing hall activities and events to provide a *'life away from the tablet/phone.'* As one hall noted, *'We struggle to attract a younger element both to use the facilities and to get involved with the running of the hall.'*

It is however acknowledged that lifestyles have changed, and a lot of people are busy with other daily responsibilities: *'All the younger people are so busy with work and families that they don't have time to help us.'*

Some respondents identify not only the need for more (and younger) volunteers, but rather the need for professional advice and training on how to address the issue of not

being able to attract and enthuse younger people, and to tackle long-term trends in voluntary engagement, particularly for those in the 25–44 age category.³

2. Financial support

Financial support has also been a major concern for village halls. Although the grants received have generally been greatly appreciated, respondents clearly identify the need for further financial support. Halls identify significant maintenance costs which they are not able to meet. For some, Covid-19 has depleted their organisational resources and their ability to raise money locally, either by fundraising activities or by offering paid services. Additionally, due to the pandemic, halls perceive a reduction in the grants available to undertake maintenance and improvement work, with most funding now focused on the pandemic and its immediate impacts:

'The Hall applied for a lottery grant to replace windows with double glazing, in the region of £10,000, but the funding was removed to help Covid related issues.'

These maintenance costs can often be significant, given the age of the village hall stock nationally. Unsurprisingly then, this is one of the pressing concerns halls articulated:

'We desperately need money to replace the main hall roof as it leaks.'

'Ideally we would like to replace the oil central heating but would need financial assistance for such a large outlay.'

'[We need a] further grant to continue [to] improve [the] hall and facilities. We have had to upgrade [the] heating system and install new fire alarms to meet new legislation.'

Environmental sustainability and legal requirements are often mentioned as reasons why halls need to undertake refurbishment and improvements. The improvements would also, it is argued, contribute to lower the running costs:

'We need [a] large capital outlay to bring the building up to a more environmentally sustainable standard so we can reduce our running costs (especially for heat and power).'

Aside from these capital outlays, village halls fear not being financially viable until restrictions are lifted completely, and communities have fully recovered. There is a demand therefore for bridging grants to facilitate village halls to cope with the immediate uncertainty:

'If we cannot run enough activities that use the bar, we will not break even and will continue to need financial support to survive.'

'If people do return to the activities they were doing before Covid then we can continue to run a sustainable business. However, it could be many months before we are back to full capacity. A 'bridging grant' to recognise that [will be needed]. If restrictions go on longer than the current Road Map, continued support [is needed] through furlough, hospitality grants etc.'

³ See for example ONS (2017). Billion pound loss in volunteering effort. Accessed at: [https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/billionpoundlossinvolunteeringeffort/2017-03-16#:~:text=Despite%20the%20value%20of%20the,Life%20Survey%20\(CLS\)%20show](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/billionpoundlossinvolunteeringeffort/2017-03-16#:~:text=Despite%20the%20value%20of%20the,Life%20Survey%20(CLS)%20show)

3. Information and training

The frequently changing restrictions and legal requirements left lots of halls uncertain about the best course of action throughout the pandemic. For some, guidance from central government has been difficult to process: *'What we can and cannot do has been hard to work out from the government website.'*

Information, training and advice has been much needed and appreciated and was identified as a future support need in order to ensure safe and legal operations. Halls particularly need *'advice on the types of activities that are permitted [as the] analysis of government guidelines is difficult, and clarity is needed.'*

Further to this, respondents outlined their need for help concerning risk assessments and health and safety regulations. Volunteers are uncertain about how to ensure a 'Covid-safe' environment:

'[We need] risk assessment help. What happens if we have a Covid-19 case and it stops the use of the hall? How to reassure users it is safe and what requirements we and the users need to put in place?'

Apart from Covid-19 related information and training, halls are also in need of further training on financial planning and management, how to attract volunteers and community engagement (explained above), marketing, and governance and management. These needs also emerge due to new realities in a post-Covid context as halls are concerned about their future survival. Hence, there is a need to build capacity relating to bid writing and fundraising, as well as developing marketing skills to advertise halls and their services:

'[We need] advice on marketing to a wider range of new users, bearing in mind we have new and improved facilities and protocols for Covid-safe operation.'

'[We want to] improve marketing including an increased use of IT and digital support. [We need] to develop a high-quality volunteer offer.'

'A more centralised place to find out about grants available.'

'Specialist input to fundraising and bid development.'

Information and advice on governance is a perceived need, though this requirement was often only vaguely articulated: *'We always need advice on good governance.'* Information and training targeted specifically at new trustees and members would be valued, *'to help new members of the committee understand the requirements of trustees.'*

For halls to meet the great challenges ahead, it is clear that support must take diverse forms. This should encompass both increased support from local communities themselves, but also greater financial assistance to ensure halls are fit for purpose. Training and advice are also needed to help halls adapt and respond during a period of continued uncertainty. Further resources are needed for the external bodies, such as ACRE Network members, that can help halls better engage with their local communities and develop a stronger volunteer base.