

Speech 1st November 2021

Village halls are survivors, a point I made in a blog I wrote for ACRE during the pandemic and in support of Village Halls Week 2021. Village halls are much loved, and part of a community's historical and cultural identity.

They are highly valued by the people that live, work and play in that rural village, hamlet or market town.

We know many residents are prepared to fight for the survival of their hall and the possibilities of what can be achieved are endless.

Some halls have become a centre for arts and performance such as Quatt Village Hall in Shropshire. Many host a village shop not always within the building but often on the same plot creating a community hub and including a cafe, good examples are Down Ampney in Gloucestershire and Tackley in Oxfordshire. Outreach Post offices are also common in village halls such as in Trent, Dorset. Village halls are used for accommodation in local emergencies and for local group activity such as Brownies or Scouts. Rhossilli Village Hall in Wales took this one step further and created a bunk house (hostel). If you are walking in Derbyshire check out Edale Village Hall it uses its unique position to raise the profile of the hall and gets involved acting as a control centre for fell walks and the like. Village halls are a good place to be physically active and stay healthy with Yoga and dance workouts being a regular feature at the Hindmarsh Hall in Northumberland. For the less active seated exercise classes are common in Wiltshire and Berkshire village halls.

Utilisation of car parks has been on the rise since 2020 as more outdoor activities took place and communities welcomed 'fast food outlets' or held farmers markets. A few have used the space for overnight stops for self-sufficient motorhomes.

None of these activities are 'futuristic' but they ensure that the village hall is embedded in the community and provide regular incomes so that other activities and services can be provided in the building.

What do we mean by halls for the future?

A hall that is carbon neutral -

Building from straw as the community in Neatishead, Norfolk has done?
Having the highest energy standards like Bruisyard Village Hall in Suffolk?

Using air and ground source heating, having an array of solar panels?

State of the art digital connectivity providing Wifi, workspaces and distribution centres, a transport hub for driverless cars?

And to refer to car parks again, will the futuristic hall will be providing the community's car charging points. This is a hot topic and something the ACRE Network advisers will be discussing with the DoT on Wednesday.

I asked colleagues what they thought and we painted a miraculous, imaginative picture way beyond anything that seemed realistically possible or fundable at this time.

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But, as always, my colleague, Louise, has said it all in her summing up!

A hall for the future is one that is supporting the community, improving health and wellbeing, providing access to services, to lifelong learning and to quality of life.

The activities provided reduce isolation by creating friendships, good neighbourliness, and community spirit.

What more can we ask of volunteers managing England's village halls?

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I want to stress that the future of our village halls is the responsibility of all of us - volunteers, support workers, civil servants, businesses, charities - the list is endless.

These are my asks to you all:

- If you live in a rural community, check out your village hall and consider what you can do to help – setting up a website, running a fundraising event, offering expertise you may have in facilities management. Do something alongside current volunteers they may be waiting for you to come along and learn the ropes so they can retire at last!. Importantly attend events and became part of your community.
- Funders (local and national) Don't assume someone else is funding halls – they aren't. Consider the value in providing support for halls in conjunction with other funders but don't forget other spaces (such as Churches) in rural communities that may provide the only place to meet.
- I have a plea to all government departments and policy makers. We are in difficult financial times but it is important to acknowledge and recognise the value of rural village halls, how they can contribute to future society & listen to local MPs who will understand the rural context. Village halls are not businesses or domestic buildings but they have an equal contribution to make and need a little extra help as charities managed by volunteers. So putting grant funding for improvements and helping to create carbon neutral halls aside, assistance with lightening the burden of red tape or a reduction in VAT are small steps that can help.
- Local authorities at all levels are in a unique position to promote and utilise halls raising awareness of their value to all.
- If you are a hall committee member keep up the good work, we know its challenging but take a step to try something new in your hall, be open to change.
- Finally join us for Village Halls Week 2022 – raise awareness and pick up some new ideas.

I will finish with ACRE's commitment to halls:

The ACRE Network will continue its unique support service for village hall committees, providing advice, information, training and sometimes funding. We believe it is vitally important that the service is retained and at no other time was it so needed as during 2020 whilst halls were in lockdown and struggling to negotiate all the legislation as they opened up.

We will continue to work with other national organisations who rely on village halls (NRTF, WI, Pre-schools) and businesses that provide goods and services to obtain the best we can for the village halls of the future.

The ACRE Network service will evolve and look very different to the paper based, telephone and postal service of the early years, but its aim will continue to be to ensure that all village halls wherever they are in rural England can access support.

Deborah Clarke

ACRE – 1st November 2021