



Supporting vibrant and sustainable rural communities
through the Rural Community Action Network

Rural Community Buildings and Environmental Sustainability

In 2009 ACRE carried out its third national survey of almost 10,000 rural community buildings, updating data from surveys in 1988 and 1998 with information from 2,355 respondents. This is the second in a series of short reports providing additional information and supporting the key findings.

Community buildings have an important part to play in improving environmental sustainability in rural areas, with potential to demonstrate energy efficiency, renewable energy and sustainable buildings in action. This report explores what they are doing, the constraints on further activity and recommends key measures which will help them play a greater role in sustainability.

ACRE encourages both local and national Government, utility companies and all types of funding bodies to take note of the following:

1. Provide for the continuation of the Big Lottery funded Community Sustainable Energy Programme and ensure that rural halls benefit from all possible incentives including the upcoming Green Deal programme.
2. Consider how all hall committees can access an energy efficiency audit of their building without considerable financial outlay.
3. Introduce permitted development rights for solar panels on non-domestic charity buildings.
4. Raise awareness of the 5% VAT on fuel and energy charges for charities and remove environmental charges, such as the Climate Change Levy.
5. Encourage parish councils to borrow to invest in environmental sustainability of local facilities by relaxing the rules on repayment by local organisations.
6. Increase the capital in the Rural Community Buildings Loan Fund to help make halls fit for purpose and enable investment in renewable energy.
7. Support the reduction of VAT to 5% on improvements and extensions to charitable buildings and call for a VAT refund scheme for charities affected by the recent 2.5% increase. £7million of investment was lost to irrecoverable VAT on work to village halls in the last five years, which includes refurbishment and extensions that included energy efficiency measures and renewable energy installations.



Stonehaugh Community Hall

ACRE and the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) together deliver a local advisory service tailored to the needs of rural community buildings throughout England. This service aims to ensure that hall trustees have access to accurate information about regulatory requirements, training and one-to-one advice and support with business planning. All RCAN advisers are networked by ACRE, undertake an OCN accredited course and are provided with resources to support their work. The national Hallmark quality standards programme encourages hall trustees to adopt best practice through a peer visitor programme. However, demand from halls for support often exceeds supply and demonstrates the need for a proactive, local service that can support all halls to achieve their aspirations and potential.

Community buildings contribute to sustainability

90% of rural community buildings are charities run by local volunteer trustees, mainly village halls. It is clear from the survey that many trustees are keen to improve environmental sustainability. 69% of respondents had taken steps to improve energy efficiency of their halls and 34% had plans to further reduce the hall's environmental impact. Energy efficiency measures which offer good carbon and financial savings have been difficult to implement due to lack of funding, whereas renewable energy installation has been stimulated by grant funding. The charitable objectives and low income of most rural community buildings make it essential that incentives, such as the Feed in Tariff, Renewable Heat Incentive and the proposals for Green Deal are available to all rural community buildings.

Community buildings support environmental sustainability in three distinct ways:

- The presence of a local, multi-purpose meeting place providing a wide range of community activity reduces car journeys and carbon emissions by providing locally accessible services and social activities that are accessible on foot and by bicycle.
- Installation of measures such as insulation, low energy lighting, grey water recycling and renewable energy generation improves the impact of the building on the environment.
- Community buildings play an important role acting as demonstration projects. They can enable hall users to experience the benefits and, together with energy monitoring and displays, educate people about ways in which they can participate in reducing carbon emissions, encouraging private action.

Access to local facilities reduces carbon emissions

In rural areas community buildings serve an important role in reducing isolation, particularly for young people, vulnerable, frail, disabled and elderly people. A meeting place, that people can walk to is also very important for health and wellbeing. Some halls have cycle racks but the frail and vulnerable need to be brought by car and less than half the respondents (48%) have designated parking for disabled people, and 23% have no parking at all.

Whilst 85% of the villages responding had a bus service, only half of these have services at evenings and weekends. Some respondents had a bus service only once or twice a week. The need for local facilities to provide services and social activities for those without private transport and to avoid car journeys elsewhere is therefore evident.



Barrington Hall



5% of respondents are used by WI or Farmer's Markets, providing a low carbon miles outlet through which local producers can make an income. 4% have a post office and 1% a community shop.

If there is a bus service, when is it available?

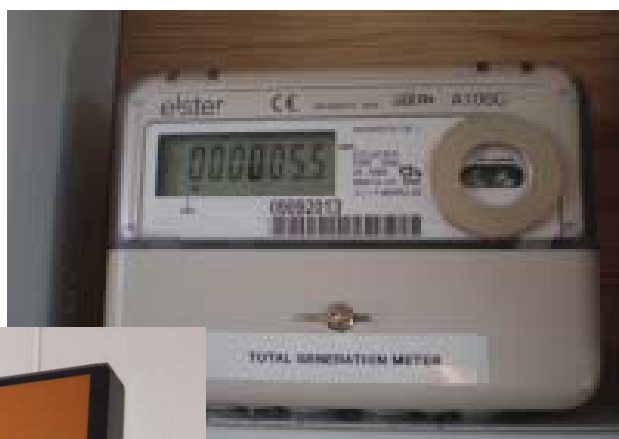
Once a day	12%
Daytime Monday to Friday	33%
Day and evening Monday to Friday	7%
Day and evening including weekends	48%

8% of respondents had a railway station; 53% were more than 5 miles from the nearest station.

The closure of rural shops and post offices has created difficulty accessing fresh food, cash and other services and a small but growing number of halls are now providing retail services.

Engaging with the community raises awareness

88% of the respondents were charities managed by a committee which represents user organisations and elected members of the public, most commonly a village hall trust. Being well networked in their community, they are in a good position to foster action to improve sustainability. Answers to the survey show that, although their charitable objectives are not environmental, trustees are becoming more engaged.



Does Your Hall	Response Percent
Encourage participation in community led initiatives?	38%
Have procedures in place to minimise its environmental impact?	16%
Involve users in devising action plans to improve the impact of the hall on the environment?	10%
Have a written environmental policy?	8%

The table above shows that 48% had also encouraged and involved users to co-operate with efforts to improve sustainability. Although this was largely successful, it was also the measure that proved most difficult to enforce, as some users forget to turn thermostats down and switch off lights when leaving the building, tamper with heating controls, prop open self-closing doors and fail to sort their waste. Tamper-proof heating and lighting controls are strongly recommended, and some halls have coin-operated heating. User co-operation is important because the majority of rural community buildings only employ part-time cleaners/caretakers.

Committees that had been successful with active public engagement emphasised the value of speaking to users, rather than relying on notices, and making energy efficiency and waste reduction part of a whole community approach to sustainability.

Issues for a small number of halls are:

- Unreliable equipment; sensors need regular replacing
- Equipment not adequate for the purpose; old low energy lighting, inadequate output, insufficient hot water to cater for large events.

Unfortunately failures in a public setting are highly visible and detract from encouraging wider adoption, so good quality equipment is essential.

Community halls have a positive impact on the environment

Energy Efficiency

69% of respondents had taken steps to improve the energy efficiency of the hall but only 21% had undertaken an energy efficiency audit and the tables below, together with comments from respondents, indicate that measures are usually installed piecemeal, as funds allow. It is only when funding is obtained for wider improvements that a more comprehensive approach can be taken.

Which of the following steps have been taken to improve the energy efficiency of the hall?	Percent response	Ranking for success
Improved heating controls (eg timer, thermostatic valves)	69	1
Double-glazing	58	2
Instant/Point of Use water heater(s)	55	5
Monitoring electricity and gas use	51	
Notices/Encouragement to users to save energy	48	6
Energy saving lighting	42	7
Increased roof insulation (270mm)	30	3
Self-closing doors	26	
Draught-proofing	22	10
Lowered ceilings	16	
Cavity/wall insulation	15	8
PIR sensors	13	9
New heating system or boiler		4

Note: Respondents were invited to give the three most and least successful measures. The ranking for the most successful is shown in the right hand column.

As heating and lighting are one of their principle running costs, community buildings are particularly vulnerable to energy price rises. Examples obtained when the survey was carried out show around 20% of halls' expenditure goes towards energy costs, which is higher than the definition for households in fuel poverty. Investment in energy efficiency is generally cost effective and, as well as reducing carbon emissions and energy consumption, it often improves comfort and user satisfaction.

Heating

The chart below shows that although almost 40% of respondent halls are on mains gas, 19% heated by oil and 37% by electric radiant, convector or night storage heaters. Those with electric heating fell by 8% since the previous survey ten years ago.

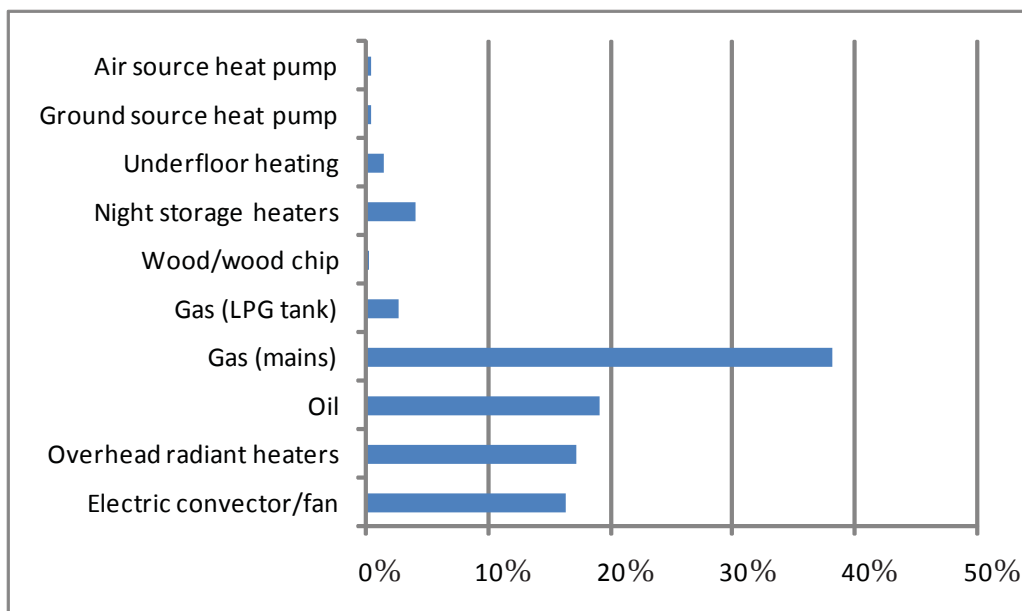
1% (22 halls) had renewable heating but we note that a similar number have since been awarded grants for renewable heating from the Big Lottery Fund Community Sustainable Energy Programme.

A modern gas condensing boiler in a well insulated building is a carbon efficient and economical choice and since the previous survey the proportion with gas fired heating had increased by 10%. However, gas is not available in all rural areas and halls using oil are likely to become vulnerable to price rises with future supply issues.

Committees have, however, been faced with no option but to install a new, more efficient oil boiler because defective heating has to be dealt with urgently, otherwise it poses a health risk for vulnerable users. The substantial cost differences and the long process involved in applying for grants has inhibited transfer to renewable energy.

The Boiler Scrappage Scheme UK was not available to community owned buildings; ACRE intends to ensure that any future schemes will be applicable.

Volatile energy prices have been a significant problem for halls. Treasurers are volunteers but need to react quickly to price changes, to check the small print in contract terms and compare companies. Charities can become strapped into high priced contracts although a number of companies now offer to locate better deals.

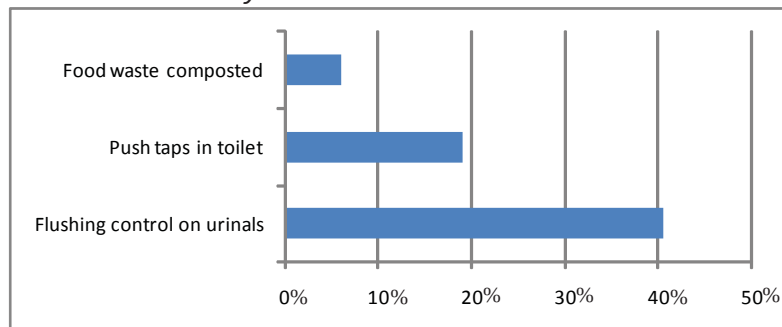


Halls contribute to saving resources

73% of respondent halls actively try to save resources such as water, waste food, bottles and cans. 1% reported difficulty with recycling owing to the refusal of local councils to collect items for recycling from halls free of charge and/or closure of local facilities. Despite this, the measures regarded as most successful were recycling and installing flushing controls on urinals.

Biddenham Village Hall collects newsprint, paper, envelopes and shredded paper for recycling; they have six bins stored in a barn nearby. They are always accessible but keeping them away from the hall avoids fire risks. The hall receives £10 per tonne from the recycler and a further £32 per tonne from the County Council as a recycling credit (so landfill is not used up). This brings in over £1,500 per year which helps keep hire charges down and pays for improvements to the Hall.

Other sustainability measures



ACRE played a role in the 2009 campaign that resulted in a section being added to the Flood & Water Management Act enabling water companies to create concessionary charging schemes for surface water drainage in all community buildings.

Use of renewable energy is increasing

26 respondents (1.2%) had renewable energy installations and a number had several technologies (aiming for zero carbon emissions through using PV panels to power heat pumps). A few halls have wind turbines but had not responded to the survey. Solar thermal panels are cost effective only where there is considerable hot water use, such as showers serving sports facilities.



Renewable Energy	No of Halls
Solar Photovoltaic Panels (PV)	22
Solar Thermal Panels	7
Ground Source Heat Pump	9
Air Source Heat Pump	11
Wind Turbine	0
Wood Chip/Wood Pellet boiler	2

Since the survey was undertaken we note that 43 community buildings, urban and rural, have received grants from the Community Sustainable Energy Programme, mainly for PV panels and heat pumps.

The Beechwood Hall, Hamsey, East Sussex

Rather than build a new village hall the old pavilion was refurbished in 2007 to save the “embedded energy” and reduce material sent to landfill. The hall is clad in Chestnut, insulated with sheep’s wool and has energy efficient lighting. A 6kW Proven Wind Turbine provides electricity to power an 8kW Ground Source Heat Pump supplying underfloor heating. The heat pump uses 2kW and surplus electricity is sold to Green Energy (at 15p/unit 2010). Flat plate collector solar thermal panels (chosen because they do not overheat when not in use) supply hot water for showers. Large visual displays show how the system is operating. Funding of £320,000 was provided by the Low Carbon Buildings Programme, EDF energy, Viridor and Biffaward landfill funds, DEFRA’s Rural Enterprise Scheme and fundraising. A Bio digester sewage treatment plant was installed in 2009 at a cost of £9,000.

The Rural Community Action Network has been supporting environmental action by trustees through:

- Working with national Energy Action to deliver energy efficiency training for county based village hall advisers
- Providing an information sheet, How Green is your Hall?
- Joint working with Every Action Counts to produce a publication, Your Community Building Counts.



Beechwood Hall

Recognising the barriers

The age and construction of the stock of buildings together with access to closely targeted funding and incentives, are the key areas that need examining and solutions must be identified to improve environmental sustainability. Careful consideration also needs to be given to the recommendations on the front page of this report.

10% of respondent halls need urgent repairs, mainly to the roof, toilets, heating or kitchen, all of which present opportunities to improve sustainability. This is consistent with previous surveys, indicative of a steady demand for improvement commensurate with an ageing stock of buildings.

34% of respondents had plans to further reduce the hall's environmental impact through energy efficiency, renewable energy and other measures.

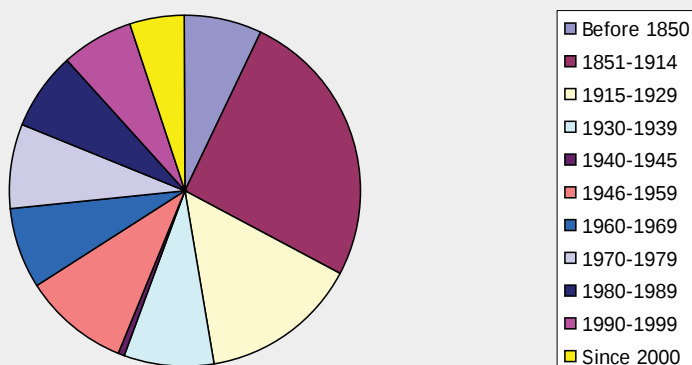
It is important to understand that even installing the simplest of energy efficiency measures such as insulation can cause problems in old buildings with solid walls. An alternative, such as dry lining, considerably increases costs.

90% of rural community buildings are charities run by local volunteer trustees. Their charitable objectives require them to provide a facility for social and recreational purposes to improve the quality of life, including services for disadvantaged people, activities which improve health and wellbeing and achieving stronger communities. An environmentally sustainable building contributes to these objectives but introducing a variety of systems and technologies has to be affordable and in the best interests of the charity. There is now heavy competition for limited funding for capital improvements and committees report difficulty locating and accessing grants. There has been no public funding specifically for energy efficiency in the types of rural community buildings referred to in this report.



Bredwardine Hall

B10 - When was your hall originally built? (ignore previous buildings and later works)



56% of respondent halls are more than 60 years old and a third are more than 90 years old, though many older halls have been upgraded at various times.

37% of respondent halls are located in a Conservation Area and 7% are listed buildings.

The Government is currently considering introducing permitted development rights for PV panels for non-domestic buildings, which would reduce cost and bureaucracy for the majority of halls.

How has the work been funded?

Just over a quarter, 26%, of the halls which had carried out improvement work in the last 5 years had improved energy efficiency and/or installed renewable energy systems.

A third of these (110 halls) provided information about funding which was specifically for environmental improvements. Landfill funds were the most significant, though eligibility is limited.

	Number of halls
Local Carbon Buildings Fund	19
Landfill Funds (eg WREN, SITA, Landfill funded County Environment Trusts etc.)	32
District Councils	17
Awards for All	12
AoNB or National Park Sustainable Development Funds	9
County Councils	8
Big Lottery Fund (8 from the Community Sustainable Energy Programme)	13

Other funders included: banks (Co-op, RBS), energy suppliers (Eon, EDF), Community Foundation Grassroots grants, COMMA, Energy Savings Trust, Regional Development Agencies, Local Agenda 21, O2, Heritage Lottery Fund, Parish Councils.

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For further information about this Report or the RCAN contact Deborah Clarke, ACRE's Village Hall Information Officer (d.clarke@acre.org.uk)

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About ACRE

Action with Communities in Rural England is the national umbrella body of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), which operates at national, regional and local level in support of rural communities across the country. We aim to promote a healthy, vibrant and sustainable rural community sector that is well connected to policy and decision-makers who play a part in delivering this aim. ACRE is nationally recognised for its expertise in ensuring rural community-led solutions are central to public policy debate.