



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

The changing use of rural community buildings

In 2009 ACRE carried out its third national survey of almost 10,000 rural community buildings, updating data from 1988 and 1998 surveys, with information from 2,355 respondents. This is the fifth in a series of short reports providing additional information and to support the Key Findings Report¹.

Information about the use of village halls provides an insight into the health of rural community life and the way in which rural communities are responding to challenges such as an ageing population and the loss of services such as buses, shops and pubs. This report considers:

- How often and who uses the hall?
- Types of use; new and old
- The reasons for changes in use
- The need for investment in an ageing stock of halls
- Total average use has trebled in the last 20 years

Key points

Community life in many villages appears to be thriving, with a surge in many social, recreational, sports, arts and educational activities, 80% are used for local arts or cultural activity.

75% of halls provide a focus for local democratic engagement, through parish council meetings. 73% provide a venue for sport and exercise, supporting healthy living.

Village halls can provide the venue for retail services for the community, under certain circumstances. The survey shows that only 1% had a community shop, 4% a post office and 5% are used by WI or Farmer's Markets. 5% indicated they had a library service.

Some subtle changes have taken place in the use of halls. 42% report that activities have wound up, 30% that activities have moved elsewhere. The reasons for winding up reflect rurality, whereas the reasons for moving reflect inadequacies in the building.

10% fewer were used by pre-schools and nurseries. Most had either moved or closed owing to the difficulty of meeting the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage in a multi-purpose building. They moved either to a primary school or purpose built premises. However, where they remain their use is more likely to have grown than any other activity and they are normally the predominant user.

Five most widespread activities	% 2009	% 1998
Private parties	95	93
Hall committee meetings	91	88
Public meetings	83	78
Polling Station	78	75
Parish council meetings	75	75

Five most regular users	% 2009	% 1998
Pre-school/nursery	34	44
Fitness classes	50	*
Mothers and Toddler	43	37
Dancing classes	39	*
Senior citizens clubs	37	42

¹ Rural Community Buildings in England 2009 Key Findings, ACRE 2009

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.

How often is the hall used?

Total average use has trebled in 20 years. In 1988 the average number of activities per hall was 16. The average use was roughly 11 hours per week. By 1998 this had risen to almost 20 hours per week and in 2009, 24 hrs per week for the main hall. Where halls have a committee room (47%), a second hall (27%) use is extended, so that the total average use is now around 34 hours per week.

Furthermore:

- In the five years previous to the survey many halls had seen use grow
- Those with increased use are more likely to have had building improvements
- More halls report new uses than those reporting activities which have closed or moved elsewhere.

But it's not all good news:

- Fewer than 10% are used to capacity, certain times or days typically being quiet while there is competition for others.

Approx how many hours in a typical week in total is the hall in use?	% Main Hall 2009	% Second Hall 2009	% Committee Room 2009	% 1998 (whole hall)
10 or less	18	7	24	20
11- 20	21	7	8	25
21 - 30	18	5	3	19
31 - 40	12	3	1	12
41 – 50	7	1	negligible	6
Over 50	7	1	negligible	9
No reply	17	75	63	9
Approx. Ave hours use/week	24	19	9	

Who uses the hall?

“Pilates - we now have nine classes a week and waiting lists which could be overcome if we could extend the hall.”

Roughly what proportion of residents use the hall regularly?	% 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Up to 25%	62	57	45
26-50%	15	25	26
51-75%	5	6	9
76-100%	1	2	4
Not known	16	10	



While the proportion of residents regularly using community buildings appears to be falling, the average number of regular users was 280, a healthy figure given that over 40% serve villages of under 600 people. The most regular users are activities for very young and older people. Comparison between the charts for use and population served show a strong relationship between size of community and use by working and retired people, halls serving larger towns and villages having hundreds of regular users of working and retirement age (a few over a thousand).

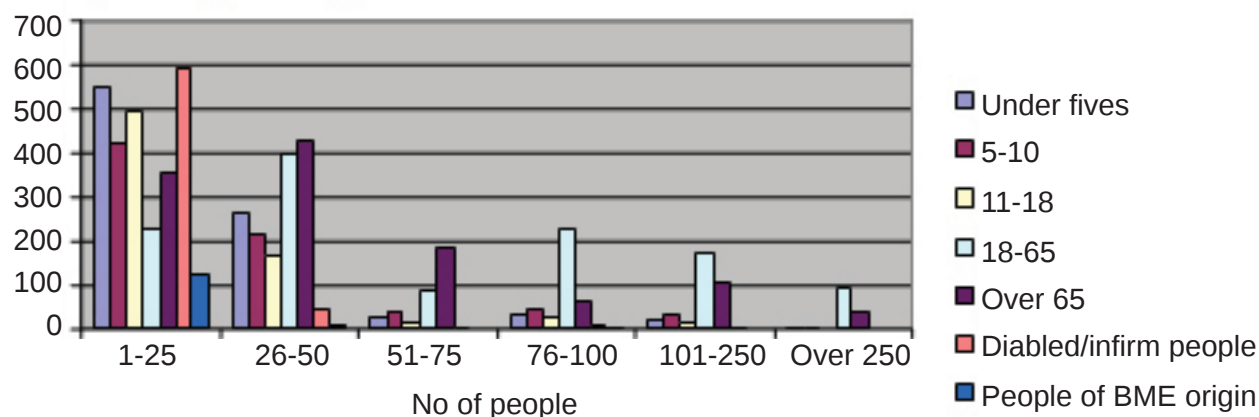
ACRE comment: At the time of the survey less than half the respondents (48%) had a regular bus service but evening and weekend services are now under threat in many areas². The health service and local authorities need to continue exploring using rural community buildings to deliver, cost effectively the services needed to maintain quality of life especially for those disadvantaged by lack of private transport.

In a tight financial climate the focus for the Big Society must be on funding suitable community facilities in villages in order to reduce long term demands on health and social care.

² Rural Community Buildings and Environmental Sustainability, ACRE, November 2010

Roughly how many regularly use the hall from each group?

No of halls (1218 respondents)



Roughly how many people use the hall regularly? (1390 responses)	Under 5 years	5-10 years	11-18 years	18-65 years	Over 65 years	Disabled/ Infirm people	BME groups
Average	31	36	27	115	71	13	6
Mode	20	52	20	100	52	10	0

ACRE comment: RCAN members report growing tensions around pre-school use of village halls. The promised review of the Early Years Foundation Stage and ISA vetting and barring requirements are welcome and the practical and financial implications for use of multi-purpose community buildings, especially by volunteer run pre-schools, need to be carefully assessed.

What is the hall used for?

Activities taking place in the hall have been divided in four categories; services and social enterprise, social and recreational, educational, and commercial.

Tables based on 2097 respondents. *= no comparative info.

Services/social enterprise (85%)	Frequency	% responses on use 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Hall committee meetings	Occasional/annual/monthly	91	88	87
Public meetings	Occasional/annual	83	78	*
Polling station	Occasional/annual	78	75	69
Parish council meetings	Occasional/annual/monthly	75	75	73
Voluntary/statutory conferences/training	Occasional/annual	28	*	*
Public information boards	Occasional/annual/daily	26	*	*
Luncheon club	Monthly/Weekly	19	12	<3.6
Clubs for disabled/infirm people	Weekly	13	*	*
Parish council/community office	Daily	10	5	*
Emergency response facility	Occasional/annual	9	*	*
Blood donor clinic	Occasional/annual	8	7	5
MP's surgery	Occasional/annual	7	*	*

IT/resource centre/telecottage	Weekly	5	1	*
Library	Daily/Weekly	5	3	4
Farmer's/WI market	Monthly	5	*	*
Community café	Weekly	5	*	*
Clinic (baby)	Weekly	4	7	14
Health clinics and related e.g. flu jabs, diabetes, hearing, breast screening, support groups	Occasional/annual	4	2	2
Post office	Weekly	4	*	*
Doctor's surgery	Weekly	4	5	7
Day centre	Weekly	4	6	<3.6
Bus pass collection point	Occasional/annual	3	*	*
Voluntary care scheme	Weekly	2	*	*
Chiropody	Monthly	1	3	5
Community shop	Daily	1	*	*
Job vacancies display	Occasional/annual	1	1	0.1
Police surgery/drop in D/W	Daily/Weekly	1	*	*
Outreach local authority services/ surgery	Occasional/annual	1	*	*
Meals on wheels	Weekly	0.5	1	<3.6

Social and Recreational (89%)	Frequency	% responses on use 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Senior citizens' club	Weekly	35	42	50
WI/Wives'/women's club	Monthly	55	59	69
Youth club	Weekly	19	23	33
Young Farmers' Club	Occasional/annual/monthly	7	9	10
Social club (with bar)	Daily/Weekly	8	10	7
Mothers and toddlers	Weekly	43	37	36
Royal British Legion	Occasional/annual	7	11	<3.6
Mothers' Union	Monthly	5	7	<3.6
Church/religious services	Occasional/annual/weekly	21	16	*
Church/PCC events	Occasional/annual	48	52	5
Bridge/whist club	Weekly	27	10	<3.6
Bingo	Occasional/annual/weekly	25	30	32
Garden/horticultural club	Monthly	35	26	28
Model car/railway/plane club	Occasional/annual/monthly/weekly	6	*	*
Twinning society	Occasional/annual	5	*	*
Wildlife/sustainability group	Occasional/annual	9	*	*
Residents/similar association	Occasional/annual	17	*	*
Dog training	Weekly	14	11	<3.6
Whist Drives	Occasional/annual/monthly	23	35	45
Jumble Sales/bazaars	Occasional/annual	63	77	79

Educational (61%)	Frequency	% responses on use 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Pre-school/nursery school	Daily	34	44	45*
Guides/Brownies/Rainbows	Weekly	21	19*	19*
Summer holiday play scheme	Occasional/annual	16	*	*
Local history classes/society	Occasional/annual/monthly	16	14	<3.6

Scouts/Cubs/Beavers	Weekly	12	9*	8*
Primary school	Occasional/annual/weekly	10	13	11
Sunday school	Weekly	9	12	<3.6
Computer courses	Occasional/annual/weekly	9	*	*
Overnight accommodation	Occasional/annual	8	*	*
Foreign language classes	Weekly	5	3	<3.6
After school/breakfast club	Daily	4	*	*
Cookery	Occasional/annual	3	2	<3.6
English language classes	Weekly	1	*	*
Other adult /further education/WEA/U3A	Weekly	4	5	23

Commercial use (32%)	Frequency	% responses on use 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Company meetings/exhibitions	Occasional/annual	21	18	<3.6
Commercial auctions	Occasional/annual	4	13	<3.6
One-day sales (e.g. carpets, shoes, etc.)	Occasional/annual	18	20	5
Antique fairs	Occasional/annual	8	16	14
Office space for business or social enterprises	Occasional/annual	3	*	*

Sports activities (73%)	Frequency	% responses on use 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Fitness classes such as aerobics, keep fit, pilates, tai chi	Weekly	51	53	43
Carpet or short mat bowls	Weekly	33	30	13
Yoga	Weekly	31	11	9
Martial arts such as karate and judo	Weekly	22	18	11
Badminton	Weekly	19	19	23
Table tennis	Weekly	18	15	16
Soft play for toddlers	Weekly	13	-	-
Darts/billiards/snooker/pool	Weekly	9	6	4
Football training	Weekly	7	6	-
Skittles	Weekly	5	-	-
Short tennis	Weekly	3	3	3

Facilities attached or sharing site (31%)	% responses on use 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Playing field or village green	25	18	-
Play equipment	20	12	14
Football pitch	14	13	13
Tennis court	8	6	6
Cricket pitch	7	7	9
Sports pavillion(s)	6	-	-
Public park/garden	6	-	-
Picnic site	5	-	-
Bowling green	5	4	-
Netball court	2	2	-
Skate park	2	-	-
Allotments	1	-	-



Arts activities (80%)	Frequency	% responses on use 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Amateur dramatics/pantomime	Occasional/annual	38	34	22
Concerts	Occasional/annual	43	40	40
Dance classes/clubs (e.g. ballroom, line, tap, scottish, folk, belly and morris)	Weekly	35	35*	25*
Art/craft exhibitions	Occasional/annual	34	30	<4*
Art classes/Art club	Weekly	30	28	7*
Band practices	Occasional/annual/weekly	29	18	<4*
Visiting professional theatre/music	Occasional/annual	29	-	-
Children's dance classes	Weekly	25	15	16
Sewing classes/Upholstery/craft classes	Weekly	20	23*	<8*
Film shows	Occasional/annual/monthly	18	10	20
Flower arranging classes/club	Occasional/annual/monthly	14	15	<4*
Choral society	Weekly	10	6	5
Folk/jazz/other music club	Occasional/annual	9	5*	3*
Photography	Occasional/annual/monthly	6	-	-
Music lessons	Weekly	5	3	3*

Other occasional social events (89%)	% responses on use 2009	% 1998	% 1988
Private parties	95	93	90
One-off fundraising events not listed elsewhere (e.g. video horse racing)	72	-	-
Wedding receptions	69	69	74
Fairs/fetes	63	62	-
Dances	62	64	64
Coffee mornings	55	54	44
Harvest supper	52	57	-
Discos	50	59	55
Church/PCC events	48	52	*
Produce show	33	35	-
Charity auctions	31	18	23
Bingo (also held weekly or monthly)	25	30	32

Understanding changes in use

"If renovations are carried out many activities will return"

215 other activities were recorded in the Survey and these are given on the ACRE website. With the 94 activities listed in the Reports the total of 309 is almost the same as in 1998, which listed 311. 373 were listed in 1988 but similar activities have since been grouped together for ease of analysis.

60% recorded new activities in the past five years indicative of widespread active community spirit in rural areas. 37% recorded activities had expanded in size or use, but 30% reported activities that had moved or closed.

A number of activities have become highly regulated and costly to provide e.g. pre-schools, baby clinics, youth clubs, senior citizen's clubs, doctor's surgeries and chiropody, which may explain why the survey indicates they are in decline.

Activities	No of halls where activities started and remained in last 5 years (1416 halls or 60%)	No of halls where activities increased in size, using hall longer or more often (866 halls, 37%)	No of halls where activities Wound Up (996 responses, 42%)	No of halls where activities moved elsewhere (713 responses, 30%)	No of halls where activities are using halls less often (301 responses, 14%)
Exercise Classes e.g. Pilates	355	65	79	50	11
Dance Classes/Clubs	305	82	109	70	11
Parents and Toddlers	204	36	70	37	12
Yoga	172	39	58	41	
Martial Arts	156	43	49	24	
Art Classes/Groups	145	43	35	28	
Craft Classes/Clubs	111	15	22		
Children's Craft/Music/Dance	101		25		
Youth Club	86	24	92	20	14
Dog Training	71	30	24	20	
Whist/Bridge	60		28		
Tai Chi	60		16		
Film Shows	57	12	9		
Indoor/Carpet Bowls	52	54	28		25
Brownies, Rainbows, Cubs, Guides	52	21	43		
Coffee Mornings	50		4		
Health Service Related/ Vol Sector	48				
Adult Education	43	14	12		
Gardening Club	42	12	14		
Band Practice	41	13	6		
History Group	39		2		
Computer/IT Club/Class	39		25		
Church Activities/Services	34	11	8		
Music Group/Choir	33		7		
Slimming/Weightwatchers	33	10	17		
Pre School	33	130	52	34	
WI/Ladies Groups	32	16	89	27	
Language Classes	31		9		
Luncheon Club	30		5		
Senior Citizens	25	7	69		10
Produce Market	22		2		
Badminton	21	14	29		20
Flower Arranging	21		15		
Bingo	18	10	25		

Ten activities most increased	% 2009	% 1998	+ % change
Yoga	31	11	20
Bridge/Whist club	27	10	17
Charity auctions	31	18	13
Band practices	29	18	11
Children's dance classes	25	15	10
Gardening club	35	26	9
Film shows	18	10	8
Luncheon club	19	12	7
Parents & Toddlers	43	37	6
Parish council/community office	10	5	5



Ten activities most in decline	% 2009	% 1998	- % change
Jumble sales/bazaars	53	77	24
Whist drives	23	35 (45 in 1988)	12
Pre – School/Nursery	34	44	10
Commercial auctions	4	13	9
Discos	50	59	9
Antique Fairs	8	16	8
Senior Citizens	35	42 (50 in 1988)	7
Bingo	25	30	5
Youth Clubs	19	23 (33 in 1988)	4
WI/Women's clubs	55	59 (69 in 1988)	4



Some of the longer term declines in important community activities are those which serve more vulnerable people likely to be disadvantaged by lack of private transport. However, there is general growth in leisure and recreational activities, in which the active retired are more likely to participate; certain services are growing, including luncheon clubs. As occasional whist drives decline, for example, more regular whist and bridge clubs are growing.



Reasons for winding up almost entirely reflect the rurality of areas served and the lack of numbers, leaders or funding to make an activity viable. On the other hand reasons for activities moving elsewhere largely reflected inadequacies in the building, such as the hall being too cold, in poor repair, lacking storage, parking or facilities for disabled people, too small or too big, the floor unsuitable etcetera.

Other reasons for activities relocating were centralisation of medical services, red tape, excessive insurance requirements or complaints. 30% of halls reported activities moving away to other venues, potentially some distance away, and may not be accessible by public transport.



Principle reasons for activities winding up	No of activities
Lack of numbers or support to make it viable	385
Leader left (moved, illness etc.)	147
Lack of leaders for young persons activity	30
Funding ceased (Mainly LEA IT classes)	27
Moved elsewhere	35
Ageing/very elderly members, lack of successors	35
Children/young people grew up, lack of successors	16
Distance of hall from town	12
Lack of funds/too costly	15

Principle reasons for moving elsewhere	No (%) of 411 halls giving reasons
Poor condition or facilities at hall, better facility available elsewhere	116 (28%)
Hall too small, larger venue needed	61 (15%)
Moved to a cheaper venue, numbers insufficient	57 (14%)
Pre-school, M & T, After school club moved to school or purpose built facility	51 (12%)
Clash of timing – facilities not available when required	36
Activity moved to more central/populous location	37

“Most of the clubs and classes began since we had the heating system renovated and it is totally warm and pleasant in winter.”

Underneath the overall growth/decline of activities there is considerable and subtle change. For example, a large number of halls have new dance and exercise classes or clubs but many have also closed. Equal numbers of halls have lost senior citizen's clubs and parent and toddler groups, but far more new toddler groups have opened. There has been modest opening of pre-schools, but closures and moves exceed openings, and where held, pre-schools have expanded more than any other activity, in response to Government requirements. Some halls list 9 or 10 new activities (commonly following refurbishment/rebuilding), some list four or five closures, with the hall being too cold or lack of numbers as the reasons for all.

ACRE comment: The reasons for these changes underline the link between building condition and use of halls. They indicate that prioritising funding to rural communities where the principle community building is in poor condition has the potential to make most difference to the sustainability of both communities and their community buildings.

“The hall is used as a last resort; the conditions are such that people would rather be elsewhere if possible.”

“Our hall was new in 2007 - we had no facilities before (apart from barns and cows out in the fields) - we're growing and developing all sorts of activities and really enjoying the buzz and community cohesion.”

76% said their hall could adequately accommodate the activities that take place within it but 24% could not and provided details. While the most widespread problem is lack of storage space for equipment the majority had multiple building problems, and it was clear that a significant number of trustees are struggling to maintain buildings that badly need major refurbishment or rebuilding in order to continue to provide much needed community facilities.



Can your hall adequately accommodate the activities taking place? If no, which areas are inadequate? Key reasons – no of halls.	% of 569 reponses (24%)
Storage space (193 insufficient, 21 better use outgrown availability, 25 none/use of meeting space limited by use as store)	58
Car park (71 too small, 63 no parking or use roadside, 35 poor surfacing, 13 lack designated spaces for disabled people)	43
Main hall (68 too small, 55 in poor repair, 46 with inadequate or costly heating/poor insulation)	41
Toilets (95 need refurbishment, 74 not DDA compliant, 17 too few – i.e. only one or two)	40
Kitchen (101 need modernisation, 58 are too small, 26 lack facilities such as a cooker)	39
Committee room(s) (23 in poor repair, 16 need one, 15 are overtaken by storage, 14 are too small)	18
Office space	13
Small hall (11 need one to meet demand)	12
Other (please specify)	12

Can volunteer committees and their halls meet future challenges?

17% of hall management committees find it difficult to adequately meet users' needs due to the age of the building. Buildings built before 1930 are less likely to be fit for modern purposes or expectations. 32% responded that lack of storage and car parking impacted on use and 10% that halls need urgent repairs or replacement.

The key issues report explains that 60% of respondents are planning major improvements or repairs in the next five years, of which 85% were planning to apply for a grant. The majority, 69%, are planning works under £50,000, and 8% planning works in excess of £200,000.

Do you have plans to develop the use or role of your hall? – please provide detail	%
To reduce the hall's environmental impact e.g. energy efficiency measures	34
For statutory or other services	11
Develop use by marketing/promotion/running social events/ starting new activities	8
Provision of IT/broadband/office/internet café facilities	2

“Having improved facilities recently we are presently actively promoting the hall in an attempt to increase use.”

Development plans are, however, being held back by a number of barriers.

Have you encountered any barriers in trying to achieve plans for the hall?	% of 364 responses
Enough funding could not be raised	56
Work would have been costly with insufficient funding to make a start	41
Volunteers could not be found to run new/extra activities asked for	39
Support of statutory authorities could not be engaged	16
The committee was not interested	9
Authorities were supportive but could not use the hall owing to a lack of appropriate facilities	5

“We reached final stage of Lottery bid, but support from the parish council had waned with change of Council and we did not get a grant.”

What would have helped you to overcome these barriers?	No of halls (% of 285 responses)
Funding	141 (49%)
Younger, more dynamic and forward looking volunteers	43 (15%)
Support from the community	19 (7%)
Help identifying funders/completing grant applications	17 (6%)
Less red tape from statutory authorities and funders	15 (5%)

Support for volunteers managing halls

“Many of our volunteers work full-time.”

55% of respondents had sought advice from the local Village Halls Adviser in the last 5 years and 83% rated the advice good or excellent.

“Your publications have been very useful. The Rural Community Council has been our main source of advice.”

Complaints identified:

- the impact of staff redundancies in some Counties and
- that frequent changes in staff hampered long term project advice and that staff were funded for too few hours to provide the help needed.

The comments emphasise the need for continued availability and consistency of expert advice services across the whole country. This could be funded by central Government or through local authorities and in partnership with other sector organisations but there is need for a geographical spread and detailed understanding of the needs of volunteers managing halls.

Which aspects of training or support in running a community building would your committee benefit from? 365 responses (19%)	No of halls
Legislative requirements e.g. health and safety, risk assessment	147
Making grant applications/finding funding sources	88
Accounts/budgeting	42
Marketing	39
Fundraising	37
Finding, motivating and keeping volunteers	31
The role of committee members/trustees	23



“There is a limit to what volunteers can be expected to achieve. They already contribute a lot of their time on a voluntary basis.”

The National Village Hall Survey 2009 collected information from 2,355 village halls and other similar rural community buildings. ACRE released the Key Findings Report in November 2009, followed by a series of reports, of which this is the fourth.

Key Findings

This provides summary of data collected and makes 10 recommendations.

Economic Impact of Community Buildings in Rural Communities

Demonstrates that investment in rural community buildings has a multiplier effect. Building works create local employment, new halls activate community activity and development of services, which have important social benefits and creates further employment.

Rural Community Buildings and Environmental Sustainability

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.

Rural Community Buildings, Arts, Sports and Licencing Requirements

The survey shows that in today's society rural community buildings have a multi-purpose role, serving as a social centre, arts centre, sports centre and, in some cases, providing education, health or retail services. Licensing changes, in particular, can impact significantly on the running of community buildings and local community activity.

The changing use of rural community buildings

Research into the use of halls provides an insight into the health of rural community life and the way communities are responding to the changing nature of service delivery.

The State and Management of rural community buildings

This report demonstrates the responsibility that volunteer trustees undertake in managing buildings and makes suggestions that could ease the financial and legislative burden.



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For further information about this Report or the RCAN, contact Deborah Clarke, ACRE's Rural Community Buildings 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.