



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

West Devon Village Halls Community Asset Map

Audit Evaluation Report

February 2024



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A year after the start of the Devon Village Halls Audit project, we'd like to share our findings from the **33 West Devon Village Halls** that we've audited to date, which form a unique new community asset map for Devon's rural communities.

Broadly speaking, West Devon Village Halls are the hubs of their rural communities. They provide a wide range of activities for entertainment, socialisation, health and wellbeing. Some have also stepped in to provide rural services that their community has lost, demonstrating flexibility and a deep understanding of community need.

The report looks at Hall Capacity, Occupancy, Financial Status (inc. Covid-19 impact), Digital Connectivity, Governance, Community Resilience, Health and Wellbeing hub potential, Accessibility and Environmental sustainability.

The findings provide an insight into the great work that Village Hall committees do, but also highlight areas of training need and financial support such as:



Funding to upgrade their facilities.



Support to market their halls and increase bookings/revenue.



Support to work together in hubs to share best practice.



Training and support for increasing online presence and marketing.



Access to good quality and economically priced Wi-Fi.



Training in volunteer recruitment and governance.



Well positioned Village Halls can be ideal designated places of safety in an emergency.



Funding for virtual medical appointments to take place in Village Halls.

We hope that you find this report informative, and we look forward to sharing the Devon wide Village Hall Audit report later in 2024.

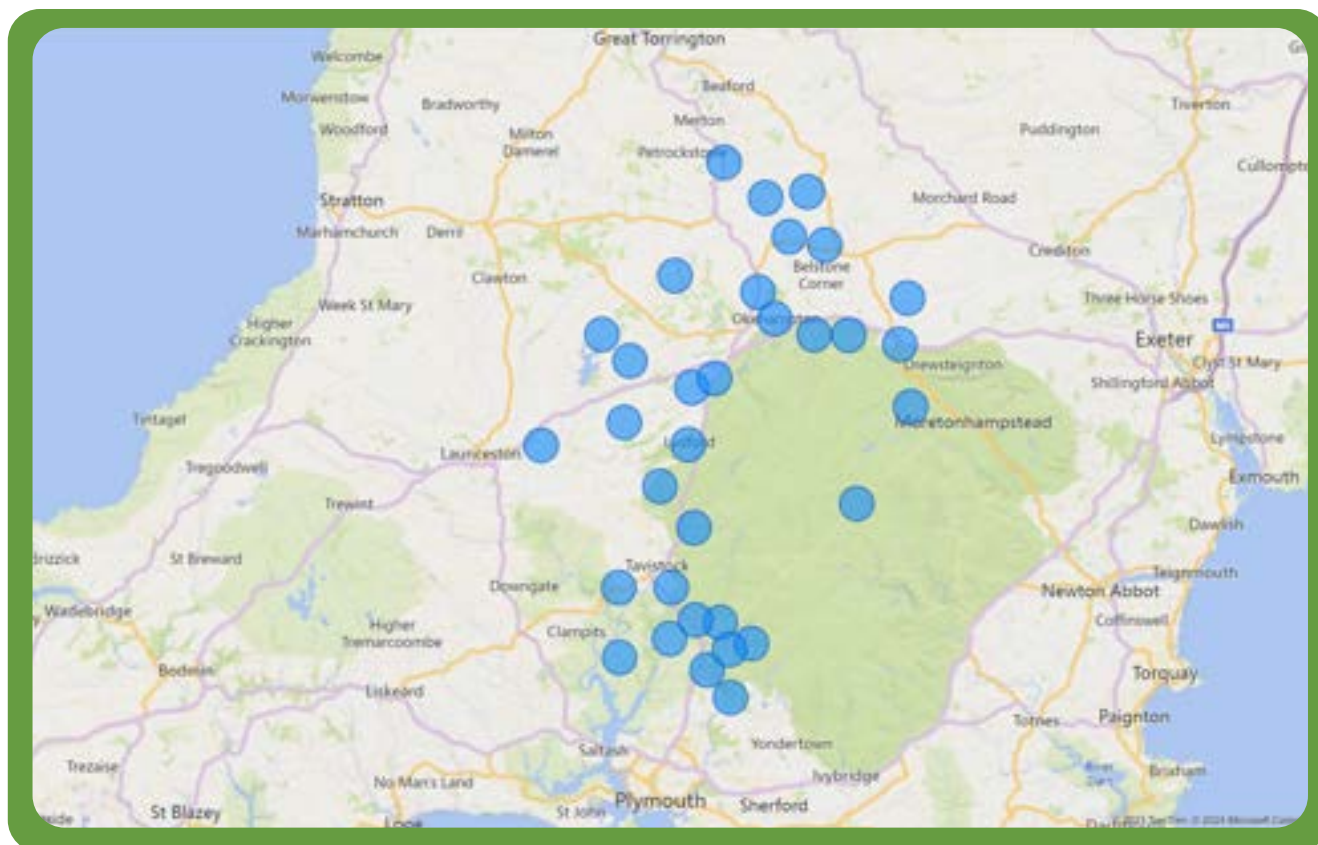
1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Devon Communities Together (DCT) began carrying out the first ever audit of Village Halls across Devon in September 2022. Our aim is to create a unique community asset map of Devon rural Village Halls, vital rural community assets, to further understand the potential, successes, and challenges that they face. The data we collect in our final report will enable communities, Village Hall custodians, local service providers and policy makers to make informed decisions about the sustainability, capacity, potential new uses, and audiences for these Village Halls.

DCT has, at the time of this data collection, audited **307 Village Halls**, all of which we have visited onsite in order to gather intelligence and insight from the community volunteers managing the halls. There are **39 Village Halls** located in West Devon, **33** of which have been successfully surveyed to date.

13 West Devon Village Halls are Members of DCT enjoying the benefits of free/discounted training sessions, support with funding applications, model policies and newsletters including funding opportunities. **3** West Devon halls have chosen not to engage with the audit, two due to lack of time and one didn't see any benefit for their Village Hall. We still have another 3 West Devon Village Halls to visit. The halls are diverse in age and stature, but all are run by committees made up of local volunteers.

MAP OF WEST DEVON VILLAGE HALLS AUDITED TO DATE:



As you read this report, please consider the following:

What would the impact be on rural communities if Village Halls were allowed to decline and permanently close?

We have been amazed by the variety of activities that West Devon Village Halls offer their communities. The following word cloud shows the most frequently offered activities across West Devon:



Some of the other activities offered by West Devon's Village Halls include:

- Restore cafe
- Film clubs
- History Group
- Knit & natter
- Circuit training
- Grapevine
- Railway group
- Warm welcome group
- Rock & roll jive
- Dog training
- Tap dancing
- Silver threads
- Environment group
- Post Office
- Farmers' markets
- Commoner's meetings
- Skittles
- Gig club winter training
- Faith group

Due to the wide range of activities on offer, we found that hall users generally represent quite a balanced demographic. In the words of hall committee members, some observations about the range of ages and activities are:

“A balance of most age groups, quite diverse.”

“Local and non-local, retirees and mixed ages for panto and market.”

“Older people and school age, people from the Parish.”

“All ages, people come from all over.”

The audit takes a comprehensive look at a range of different aspects of current Village Hall capacity and sustainability such as:

- External Spaces
- Heating & ventilation
- Digital connectivity
- Purpose & use
- User demographic
- Accessibility
- Governance
- Financial status

The on-site audit surveys are conducted by a specialist DCT Community Development Team. The discussions that take place as part of the audit process help us to form a picture of what the physical building can offer; what tools the committee can access to optimise and publicise their community asset; what activities their communities currently enjoy; whether the whole community is able to access these activities and how secure the committee is in their governance and financial status.

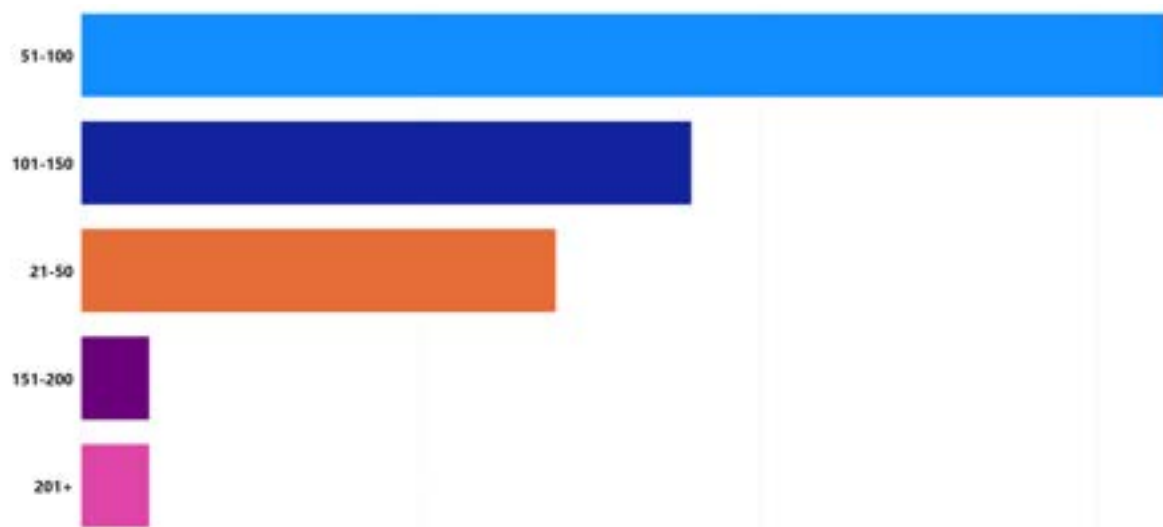
From October 2023 we've extended the scope of this project in East Devon by auditing all charity run Community Buildings. This will enable us to build an even more comprehensive picture of the area's community assets, highlight any gaps and celebrate the diversity of locations available to the people of East Devon.

2. VILLAGE HALL CAPACITY

KEY FINDINGS

Audit data analysed to date, shows that **47%** of West Devon Village Halls can accommodate between 51 and 100 people when the hall is set up for a sit-down meal. 51-100 is a lot of people, demonstrating how versatile West Devon Village Halls are as community assets. A further **26%** of halls can accommodate an impressive 101-150 people. It begs the question why these community spaces aren't used more.

Seating capacity (main hall)



WHAT WE LEARNED

62% of these Village Halls have comprehensive kitchen facilities, so can provide full hot meals if required, although we've found that these facilities are often underused. Local people don't have the food hygiene certification required as they don't prepare food on this scale on a regular basis. Most halls also have car parking, predominantly owned by the hall, but occasionally a Parish Council asset, making accessing the facility quite straightforward for most people including those with mobility problems. This data demonstrates how easily Village Halls could become the hub for local accessible rural service provisions and activities. In one West Devon Hall, they own wall and ceiling drapery that's hired by hall users to "pretty up" the hall for special events.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Halls would benefit from funding to upgrade their facilities and décor to make them more attractive as celebratory spaces.



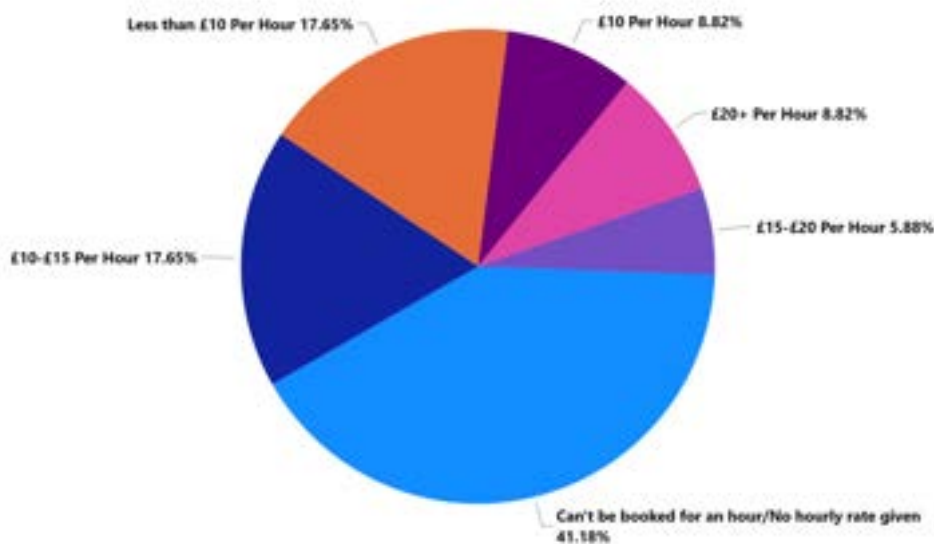
3. VILLAGE HALL OCCUPANCY RATES

KEY FINDINGS

Occupancy rates vary greatly across this data set with **44%** of audited West Devon halls in use for 0-25% of the time, while only **3%** are occupied for 76-100% of the time. The amount of use that a hall has directly correlates to their income. Booking fees are the largest generator of income with **44%** of halls deriving over half of their income from bookings so increasing hall usage is beneficial both for the halls revenue and for the community enjoying hall activities.

Hall hire ranges from £5 an hour to £20+ for commercial users. Halls vary in their charging rates as some charge per session (half a day), some include use of the kitchen and others have reduced rates for regular bookings. Having said this, when compared with commercial premises, Village Halls are always the more economical option.

Cost per hour (main hall)



WHAT WE LEARNED

Although bookings provide the largest amount of revenue, it's important that Village Halls are accessible to all. Halls may benefit from business support to ensure that they remain economically viable, with sufficient funds for necessary repairs and material upgrades. **Just eight** of the West Devon Village Halls audited have an up-to-date Business Plan and **21%** said they would like help to run as a business.

'Did you know....'

Meldon Village Hall features in the 2023 film version of "And Then Come The Nightjars", a powerful drama about the impact of Foot & Mouth and the relationship between a farmer and the vet who has to cull his herd.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Halls would benefit from support to market their halls and increase bookings/revenue.

4. VILLAGE HALL FINANCIAL STATUS AND IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VILLAGE HALLS

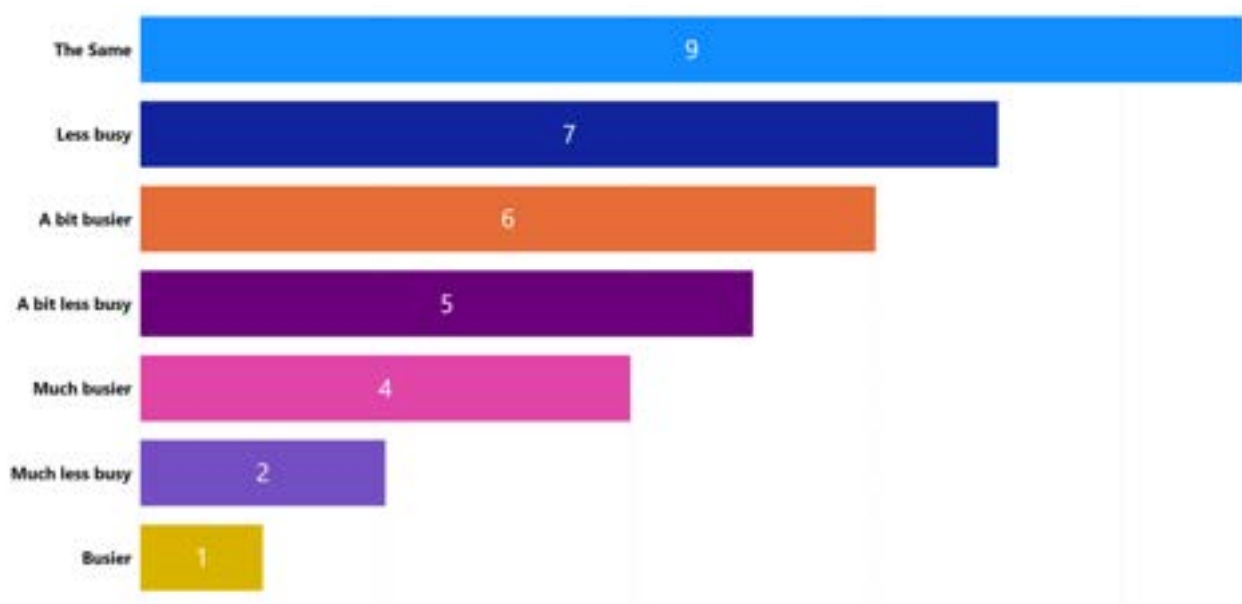
KEY FINDINGS

West Devon Village Halls generally reflect a similar picture to the rest of Devon when we analyse their revenue sources. There is more reliance on fundraising events and slightly less reliance for the majority of their funding from bookings revenue.

45% rely on income from bookings for 51-100% of their revenue, with **12%** relying on this funding source for 75-100% of their income. **50%** of West Devon Village Halls sourcing 0-25% of their revenue by fundraising. **59%** of West Devon Village Halls that responded, said they got 0-25% of the hall's revenue from donations, a higher percentage than the Devon average of **41%**.

Halls across West Devon have generally fared well since Covid with **59%** either busier or the same as pre-Covid levels, this figure is higher than the Devon average of **39%**. Halls that quickly made their audiences feel safe, publicising and following their Covid safe procedures bounced back quickly post pandemic.

Hall occupancy (Compared to pre Covid-19)



WHAT WE LEARNED

In some cases, behaviours changed over the Covid period, and some halls found that groups folded as the organiser decided they didn't want to carry on or sometimes groups restarted, but the local enthusiasm had waned during the period of inactivity. Children's parties in Village Halls seem to have made quite a comeback in the post Covid era with two halls mentioning that this was a growth area for them.

Levels of financial security are generally good (although this may still be skewed by Covid grant funding) as **74%** of halls have over 12 months running costs available to them. Possibly linked to this, when asked about their level of confidence in future financial security and support from the community, **33%** responded as very confident. This suggests that the communities want their Village Halls to provide activities for them to enjoy. The challenge is keeping the hall fit for purpose so that activities and events can continue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Halls may benefit from working together in hubs to learn best practice and lessons learned from each other.



5. DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

KEY FINDINGS

50% of West Devon halls are accessing Broadband with the Devon wide percentage sitting at 63%. This leaves 50% of Village Halls in West Devon without broadband. 53% of West Devon Village Halls have useable mobile reception, which is well below the Devon wide the figure of 68%.

West Devon halls with Broadband



Digital connectivity is an important aspect in village halls future appeal. 12% of West Devon halls with Wi-Fi use fibre optic, 26% have copper cable with the others using either Fixed Wireless Access or Satellite. All halls bar one report that the Wi-Fi works well or well enough. That said, with 50% of West Devon Village Halls having no broadband, there's still a long way to go on the road to good accessible connectivity.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Many halls want to attract new and younger audiences who will have an expectation that good quality Wi-Fi is available. Youth clubs and gaming events can't be held in halls with poor or no Wi-Fi, nor can office space be rented out or online medical appointments be made available to the local community. Connectivity is an important part of village hall's future sustainability.

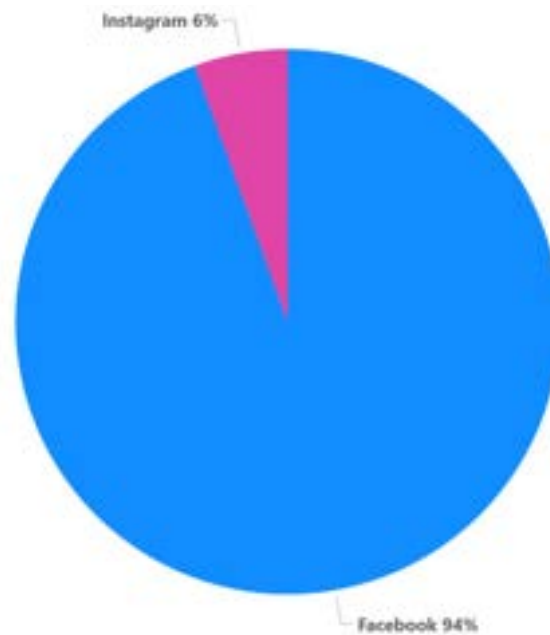


5.1 SOCIAL MEDIA

KEY FINDINGS

94% of audited halls in West Devon are active on social media, predominantly Facebook. There is some room for an increase in their online presence and another potential training need to broaden the platforms used. As previously reported, halls rely heavily on income from bookings, so being accessible to all in the community is key to increasing revenue.

Halls use of social media



When asked if halls had a website or were part of the Parish website **76%** responded positively. This leaves **24%** of halls with no website presence.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Venue research for most people starts online, putting halls without a website at a distinct disadvantage. With bookings often relied on for hall running costs, being visible to potential customers is vital.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Training and support for increasing online presence and marketing would be very beneficial for West Devon Village Halls.

Access to good quality and economically priced Wi-Fi needs to be a priority to support future growth in West Devon Village Halls.

6. VILLAGE HALL GOVERNANCE

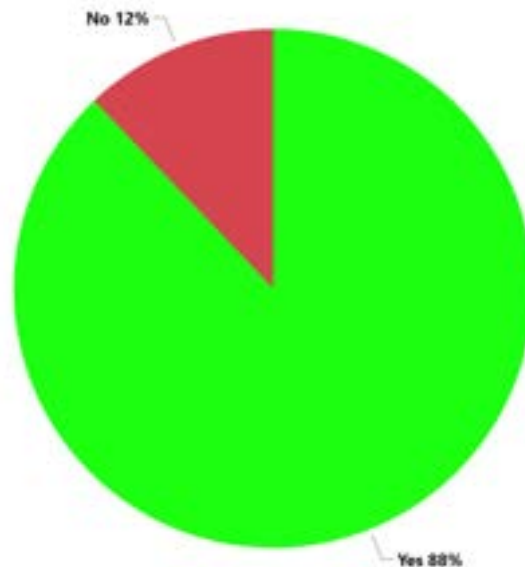
KEY FINDINGS

Village Halls are run by a management committee generally made up of between 5 and 12 Trustees. The committee are responsible for hiring out the building, fire and general risk assessment, data protection and safeguarding. They are also responsible for finances such as setting hire charges, fundraising, grant applications etc. and they report annually to the Charity Commission.

A Village Hall charity will usually have a second set of Trustees, appointed to hold the land or property on behalf of the charity. These are the holding (or custodian) Trustees. Their sole function is to hold the title to the property.

In our discussions with Village Hall Committee Members, it became clear that committee positions can be difficult to fill. **12%** of West Devon Village Halls have vacancies on their committees, as opposed to the Devon Village Hall average of **19%**. Further support is needed to ensure these important community assets are managed correctly by suitably well-trained volunteers.

Are all committee positions filled?



As Deborah Clarke from ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) said in The Village Hall Survival guide “You can have a building, but without local people to run and manage it, then it’s just an empty shell.”

59% of Committee Members in West Devon Village Halls have an up-to-date copy of the governing document. According to the 2004 Charity Commission Village Halls and Community Centres Report: *The charities that thrive are those in which trustees are pro-active in understanding their responsibilities and in ensuring that their charity provides activities that meet local needs.*

The report also states: *Active vibrant governance and an active vibrant Village Hall go hand in hand. Our research revealed a clear identifiable link between the ability to attract users, their ability to attract trustees and other volunteers, and their ability to generate funding.*

Devon Communities Together's audit data shows that **76%** of West Devon Village Halls have a Health & Safety policy in place, **50%** have a Safeguarding policy and **32%** have a Data Protection policy.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Attracting young people to join hall committees is a particular issue, with some committee members staying on longer than they'd like to, as there's no succession planning. The majority of West Devon Village Hall committee members are retired people, old enough to have time to give to their community and at the start of their tenure, well enough to be able to participate.

Micro volunteering has been suggested by three halls across Devon as one way to attract a younger audience to engage with helping at Village Hall events. The idea of joining a committee isn't always popular with young people but being responsible for advertising an event on social media, for example, seems to be more achievable.

Clear communication about the role of a Village Hall committee member may also help potential new recruits to understand the sort of commitment they'd be asked to make if they did join the hall committee. **24%** of West Devon Village Halls have bi-monthly meetings, with **35%** having quarterly meetings, so the actual committee element isn't a huge time commitment.



Attracting younger people to help with their village hall would also benefit IT skill levels. When asked how many of the hall committee had excellent IT skills, **26%** reported that no one had. Thankfully **82%** of West Devon Hall committees felt they had enough people with an adequate IT skill level.

When asked if halls have trouble recruiting volunteers the following thoughts were shared:

“ Yes, no confidence, no one feels confident enough to take on the responsibility. Although have recently taken on 2 more people that are new to the village. Apathy and age of population is the cause of people not having the confidence to volunteer. people not willing to commit.”

“ Yes, time, people have demanding jobs, apathy, older population.”

“ Yes. No youngsters on the committee. Too busy with their own lives. People say yes and then don't turn up.”

“ Yes. we had an open day a few years ago and no one came. It's quite soul destroying. I have been trying to step down as chair. People will support us but they don't want to be on the committee. People don't understand what a committee does. Always the same people who do all the committees.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Training in volunteer recruitment and governance is another training need to help the sustainability of our Village Halls.

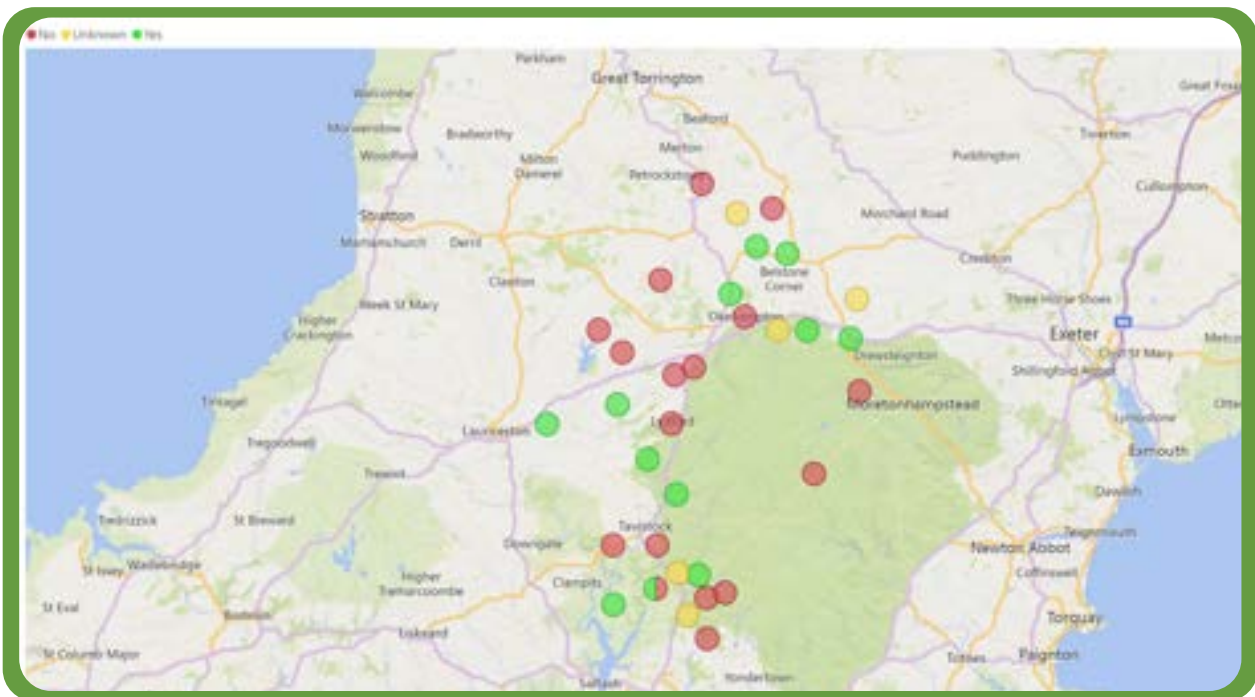


7. VILLAGE HALL ROLES IN COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

KEY FINDINGS

36% of West Devon Village Halls are designated places of safety on the Parish Councils Emergency Plan, demonstrating another vital role that West Devon’s Village Halls are able to fulfil in an emergency situation.

West Devon halls that are designated places of safety



WHAT WE LEARNED

9% of audited West Devon Village Halls are in a Devon Resilience Innovation Project (DRIP) or Devon Community Resilience Forum (DCRF) priority place. This means that their local area is being supported in natural flood management measures and/or offered targeted support with their Emergency Plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Devon’s steep sided river catchments make some areas of the county liable to flash flooding. Well positioned Village Halls can be ideal Designated Places of Safety in an Emergency.



8. VILLAGE HALLS CAPACITY AS COMMUNITY “HEALTH AND WELLBEING HUBS”

KEY FINDINGS

As the opening word cloud and list of activities demonstrates, village halls are hubs for community health and wellbeing. Providing activities on your doorstep with people that you're already familiar with can make participation much easier. It can be daunting to join clubs or activities on your own. This is particularly relevant in West Devon where **29%** of the population live in 1 person households. With an ageing demographic in West Devon (**28.5%** of the population is 65 or older), rural isolation and loneliness are real risks to the health and wellbeing of our village communities.

According to the Campaign to End Loneliness:

Prolonged and/or intense experiences of loneliness can have negative impacts on our lives. It can affect our health and wellbeing: Loneliness can increase the risk of early mortality by 26%. Loneliness can put people at greater risk of poorer mental health, including depression.

The following responses were given when asked how the Village Hall helped the physical and mental wellbeing of their communities:

“Would like to set up village buddies Facebook page so people can help each other with things like taking people to appointments and have the hall as a hub for this. Communities need to get together more and talk. It would be good to have someone who could come in and get people to come in and talk, a safe space, especially to talk about mental health.”

“Already happening via the groups that meet regularly e.g. TASS, Grief group etc.”

“Exercise classes for physical health & a singing group for companionship.”

“Already running regular mental health clinics. Various keep fit clubs/activities. Shared Lives use centre for meetings.”

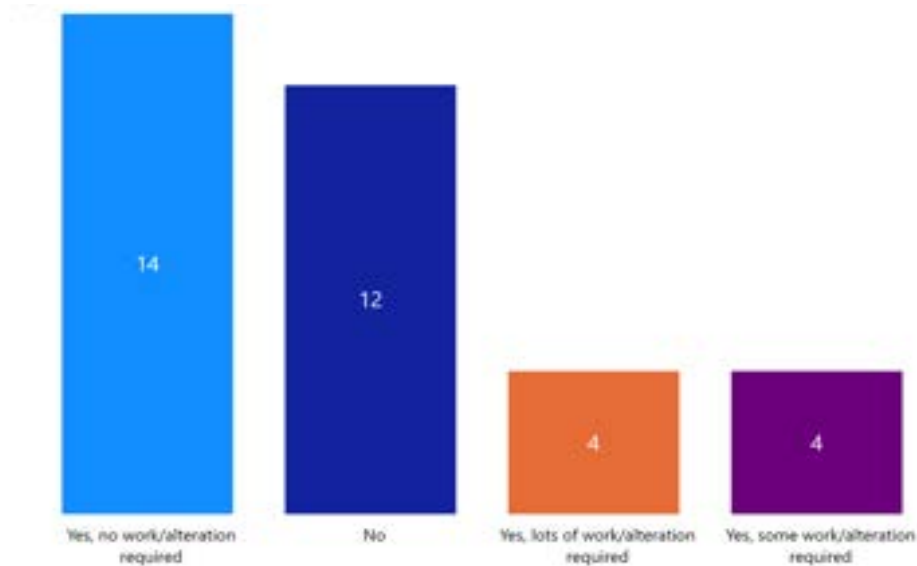
“Providing the things that bring people together. Activities for children and young people. Listening to people's problems. Having a Christian community that can chat with people. Listening and not advising. Food bank.”



The perception of access to health care in West Devon seems to be slightly more positive than for Devon as a whole. **12%** of West Devon recipients said they could easily access healthcare with **no one** responding with health care being inaccessible (the Devon average is **6%**). **15%** responded with an answer of access to healthcare being moderately accessible.

54% of West Devon Village Halls have a confidential space with the potential to be used for medical appointments. **45%** of the halls with availability of a confidential space have Wi-Fi but none of these halls also have appropriate or sufficient IT equipment/devices.

Available confidential spaces



WHAT WE LEARNED

These medical appointments could be face to face with a health care professional or online appointments where less IT literate members of the community could be supported by a digital buddy. Both types of appointment could help to address health inequalities experienced by residents of rural environments and/or those who are digitally excluded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

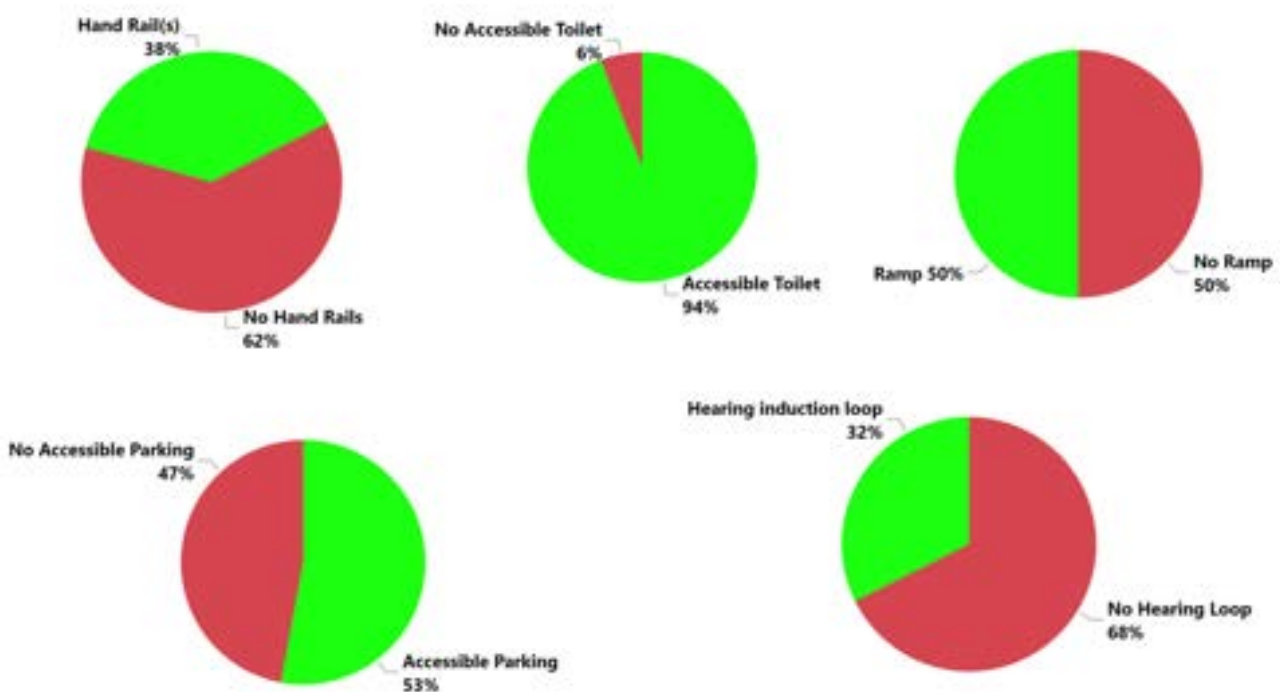
For virtual medical appointments to take place in Village Halls, funding would need to be made available for suitable IT equipment.



9. INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY OF VILLAGE HALLS

KEY FINDINGS

Accessibility is an important part of the audit process as we all want our rural citizens to be able to use their halls facilities. **12%** of Village Halls in West Devon had undergone an equality audit, but none very recently. We found that **6%** of West Devon Village Halls had no accessible toilet facilities, **26%** could offer chairs with arms (to help those less mobile to push themselves out of the chair) and **47%** offered a bench by the door of the hall so that hall users could sit down, should the need arise, before entering the hall.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Village Hall Committees would benefit from training in Inclusion & Accessibility.

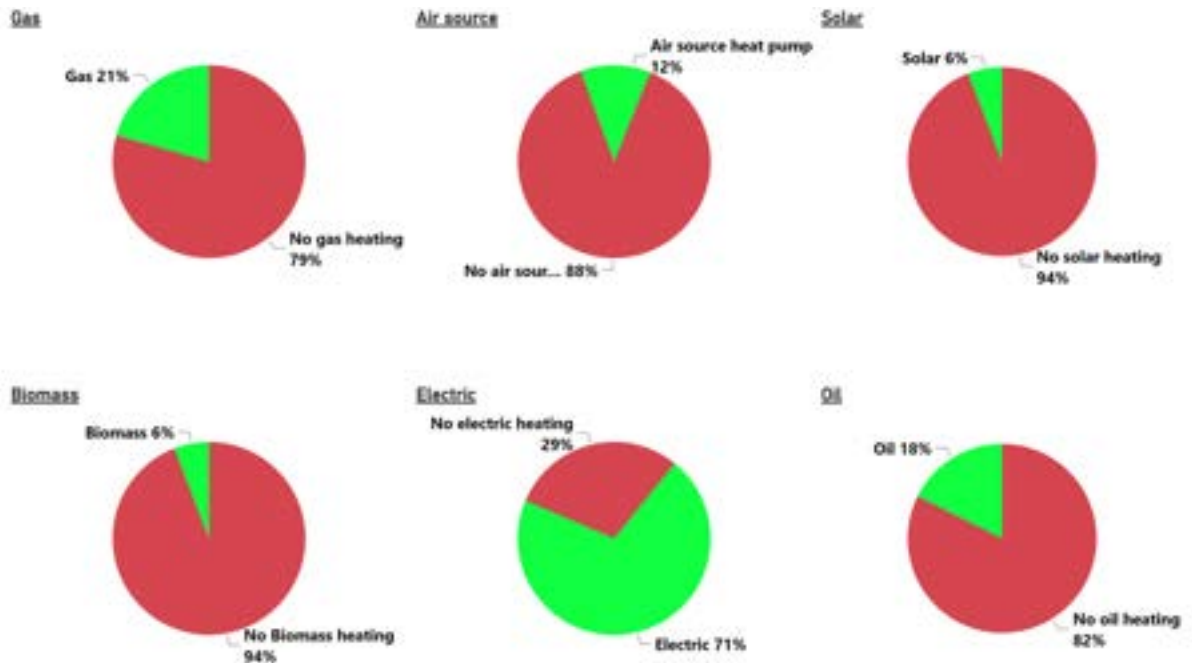
Funding needs to be made available for the necessary upgrades to take place.



10. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

KEY FINDINGS

53% of audited West Devon Village Halls currently have electric heating, 16% use gas, 13% have oil, 4% have solar electric and 9% have a air source heat pump.



When asked about plans to increase environmental sustainability, West Devon Village Halls responded as follows:

- 20% hoped to increase the halls insulation
- 27% were considering solar panels/battery storage (although this may be funding dependent)
- 10% were changing lighting to LED's
- 3% were considering an Electric Vehicle charge point
- 10% were interested in heat pumps if suitable funding was made available
- 10% were considering new windows
- 7% were looking into a new roof

WHAT WE LEARNED

The desire to improve halls environmental credentials is there, although in some cases there is a lack of understanding as to how this can be achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Funding is needed for specialist advice and support services to enable these improvements to happen.

11. IN CONCLUSION: WEST DEVON'S VILLAGE HALLS – VISION FOR THE FUTURE

When asked about their vision for the future, **27%** of West Devon Village Hall Committees cited greater usage as a priority. More community involvement/a younger audience also comes high up on the list with **30%** of committees. Material upgrades are a must for **52%** and getting Broadband is an aim for **12%** of West Devon Village Halls.

Other thoughts include:

“Continue to be there for the community, get people involved in things. Over the years the whole community thing has been lost a bit and we want to bring it back.”

“Want to have a warm space, clubs for the elderly, lunch clubs, coffee, more like a community hub.”

“Getting broadband, an added attraction, have lost bookings due to lack of Wi-Fi.”

“Bring into 21st century, get Wi-Fi and more regular bookings. Get people thinking that it's not just for tea and cakes. We need to start using Facebook and get a website. Would like to host the harvest festival and reinstate the 12th night ball and bistro nights, food tasters and wellbeing collective (physio etc).”

At the end of the discussion **62%** of Committee members said that they had actions to take away from the audit. Feedback included:

“Somebody is listening to us.”

“Made us realise we are in the right sort of place.”

“Interested in how we compare with other halls, what we can do better.”

“Extremely useful. Sometimes you are bowling along and until someone asks you questions you don't think of these things, for example the community fridge. Made us aware that we should update our policies. Hadn't thought that we could do a dementia friendly assessment.”

At the start of the report, we asked you to consider the following question.

What would the impact be on rural communities if Village Halls were allowed to decline and permanently close?

We hope you've had the opportunity to give this some thought.

Based on the audit data, it's clear that Village Halls in West Devon offer their communities social, recreational, physical and mental wellbeing activities on their doorstep. With an ageing population, such local opportunities to socialise/exercise/be creative can be a lifeline to reduce loneliness and social isolation. With so many closures of rural pubs, shops and post offices the social interactions that used to naturally take place when queuing for your pint of milk no longer happen. Without a Village Hall, the last of these social lifelines would be lost.

Audit responses demonstrate that there are training, and support needs around:



Recruiting volunteers



Increasing online presence



Business planning



Environmental sustainability



Marketing

Did you know....

That in response to the audit findings, DCT recently ran an Enterprising Village Halls (EVH) programme with 31 halls attending, 6 of which were from West Devon. Trustees wanted help to develop the use of their halls and had the opportunity to attend some “deep dive” sessions of their choice on areas such as governance, sustainable energy use, funding bids and creating a business plan. Feedback included:

“Well-resourced and informed. Good encouragement. Plenty of opportunity for reflection and interaction.”

“A great way to meet others in a similar situation and talk through ideas and problems.”

“I am recommending that other Trustees from our organisation attend the next programme.”

Alongside financial support for training, funding is needed for:



Creating local hall hubs so best practice and pitfalls can be shared



Designing and updating hall interiors to attract community/celebratory events



Increasing accessibility for the community, irrespective of their state of health

We've found Hall Committees are keen to give local people what they need and want, but sometimes understanding what that is can be challenging. Providing something for everyone, so that the community at large is represented and supported is the aim of hall committees. A busy hall tends to be a thriving hall.








Data gathered from West Devon Village Hall audits shows that we have a lot to thank our local rural volunteer committee members for. They provide a local venue that's open to the changing needs of its community.

The overall picture is one of hall committees working hard to give their communities what they want and need, but with little or no financial support. The **33** West Devon Village Halls that have been audited to date are a great example of resilience and community spirit.

There is no consistent financial support from government. Although Defra funding schemes, such as the Platinum Jubilee Village Hall Grant Fund are extremely welcome, they need expertise to apply, and competition is fierce. Grant funding for core costs would be a welcome addition to Village Halls.

The data and intelligence gathered through this audit process highlights the benefits, in this age of localism, of essential community assets like rural Village Halls should be supported by the system and have access to local funding from statutory services and other community anchor institutions.

12. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

-  **Halls would benefit from funding to upgrade their facilities and décor to make them more attractive as social/celebratory spaces.**
-  **Halls would benefit from support to market their halls and increase bookings/revenue.**
-  **Halls may benefit from working together in hubs to learn best practice and lessons learned from each other.**
-  **Access to good quality and economically priced Wi-Fi needs to be a priority to support our Village Halls' future growth and sustainability.**
-  **Training and support for increasing online presence and marketing would be very beneficial for Mid Devon's Village Halls.**
-  **Training in volunteer recruitment and governance is another training need to help the sustainability of our Village Halls.**
-  **For virtual medical appointments to take place in Village Halls, funding would need to be made available for suitable IT equipment.**