

HOW MANY OF US HAD “PANDEMIC” IN OUR RISK REGISTER?

A Snapshot Of Experiences Of
Community Buildings During
The Lockdown Of 2020

Compiled by Community Matters





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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought hardship to people in every corner of the country. But, through it all, the tireless work of communities responding to the needs of the shielding, vulnerable, and those struggling from income loss, has also offered us one of the biggest sources of hope for the future. The widespread resurgence of community action is confirmed by government data; during the height of the lockdown last April, 50% of people said those in their community were doing more to help others than before the pandemic.

What is often overlooked is that not every community has had equal access to the resources necessary to develop a sustained response. Recent research into deprived neighbourhoods without a firm foundation of social infrastructure – of which community places and spaces are a key part – shows that they have seen a lower level of community and voluntary sector response and lower levels of charitable COVID-related grant funding when compared to other deprived areas¹.

In those places in which the community response has been strong and sustained, the key enabler has often been community buildings of every form and function. Research in this report shows that from youth centres to village halls, libraries to community hubs, the ability of communities to meet local need would have been significantly reduced if these buildings hadn't been there. And, it's not just about the activities and services they offer – it is clear that they provide the space and opportunity for local residents to build the strong social capital that enables them to gather and organise when crises hit.

As Chair of Local Trust, I have witnessed first-hand the critical role played by community buildings in the many and varied responses of communities to the pandemic. Local Trust was established in 2012 to run Big Local, the most radical programme ever launched by a major funder, it puts spending decisions directly in the hands of local residents in communities across the country.

Two thirds of Big Local areas own, lease, or have access to space in a community building. Back in March, the majority of these premises were quickly adapted to meet local need. Research by the Third Sector Research Centre (2020) shows just how critical they have been in the pandemic. Where access to a building has not been possible, Big Local areas have struggled to respond effectively, whereas those with a space to base their activities were able to make much faster progress in developing and delivering support.

The community buildings featured in this report have hosted a diverse range of activities tailored to how the pandemic has played out in their local area; something mirrored across Big Local areas. Ranging from hosting a foodbank, to promoting positive mental health through telephone check ins and

1. 'Communities at risk: the early impact of COVID-19 on 'left behind' neighbourhoods – APPG for Left Behind Neighbourhoods (appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk)



befriending networks, to quickly adapting the activities and events of local groups and organisations so that they can take place virtually; all have worked hard to identify local need in order to develop their space and distribute resources to best effect.

The new year will doubtless bring its own challenges for communities, but it also offers the opportunity to build on the work done this year to ensure that they are stronger and more resilient in the future. We need to do more to support our community buildings: starting by addressing the huge loss of income many have suffered and supporting those communities without one to get together the funding and resources needed to plug that gap.

It is of the utmost importance that we take up this challenge now – otherwise community buildings will not be there to enable communities to respond effectively to future crises; we should seize the moment.

We need to do more to support our community buildings




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1. Background

One of the last things I did before the world started to close down around me, was to attend a yoga class in a local village hall and I was immediately struck by the potential impact of long-term closure on buildings like this. I know from long experience of working with community buildings in their many forms, just how important they are in developing and promoting social capital in their neighbourhoods and much of this is summed up in the following quote:



“For me, village halls are all about my head and my heart. My heart says they are essential places for people to come together, places to have fun and celebrate, places to grieve or share a common interest.

My head says they’re equally important for the economy – places for businesses like nurseries to thrive, places that host community shops, places for people to exercise. Village halls can often be the keystone to a community.”

LEAH SWAIN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, COMMUNITY FIRST YORKSHIRE

For village halls, we need to read all community spaces, owned and managed by local communities, used by local communities and used as ways of making contact with local communities. There is a long tradition in this country of developing community spaces to meet a range of needs – many community centres were established post war when significant social housing estates were being built in our towns and cities and local authorities recognised the need for people to congregate for social, educational and recreational purposes. This had been the practice of housing associations for many years and community centres were features of some of the industrial garden villages provided by industrialists for their workforce in recognition of the need for a



space to gather and develop activities and groups that would provide mutual support. They may be the first place someone goes to take part in post school learning, where they display the produce from their allotment, or hold their wedding reception or birthday party or to register their vote in the local and national election. Community spaces are key part of the fabric of our society.

Regular research into village halls is carried out by ACRE (Action for Communities in Rural England) and the latest has just been published and quoted from below. There is, however, no clear picture of urban community space, which often has a different character but is also very diverse. Over the past fifteen years, more buildings have moved from public to community ownership as part of the Community Asset Transfer process, ranging from one room drop in centres to former schools and police stations thus adding to that diversity. This report is a first attempt to raise the profile of urban community space alongside that of traditional village halls by charting some of their contributions to the COVID-19 crisis and where they have been left at the end of one lockdown as the country heads into a second one. It is anticipated that this might be the beginning of a wider study of the role of urban community space to sit alongside the work done by ACRE.

During the lockdown of spring 2020, halls were only allowed to open to provide food and medicines, emergency services such as blood donation, and pre-schools for children of emergency workers. Re-opening has been slow and cautious, taking place in tandem with the sequential unlocking of different parts of the wider economy. The results of the ACRE survey quoted above, which records the state of the sector immediately before COVID-19 forced the first ever mass closure in their history, demonstrates the value of community spaces to the wellbeing of local community, to the local economy, and to supporting volunteering. Some key findings are set out below. We need to bear in mind that these figures are taken from research of rural community space and what the overall picture might be if this research were replicated across our towns and cities.





- There is an estimated population of 10,000 village and community halls in England;
- Over 60% halls reported up to 25% of local residents using the halls regularly;
- Research conducted in 2019 suggested volunteering opportunities within community owned assets produced the equivalent of £131,926,000 in wellbeing benefits;
- The capital value of halls is estimated at between 5.2 billion and 8.9 billion pounds;
- Just under 60% of halls report costs of under £10,000 per annum, and those responding reported receiving a total of £19 million in this way, equivalent to £12,000 per hall potentially equating to £120 million per annum.

Many provide low-key simple activities, such as coffee mornings or lunch clubs, which address issues of isolation and loneliness. They also often provide the infrastructure for community businesses, such as pre-schools, cafes, post offices and shops.

The key role played by smaller charities, both generally and during the pandemic, was picked up by Danny Kruger, MP, in his recent report, 'Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant'¹ which calls for smaller organisations to "get a piece of the action". The role played by charities large and small, during both the pandemic and its aftermath, has been well documented. Research carried out by Carnegie UK² documented the critical role played by community hubs as part of the emergency response, demonstrating some strong leadership, creative practice and partnership working with the potential to bring service providers closer to local services providing building blocks for more local holistic services.


1. Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant' Danny Kruger, MP, 2020

2. Pooling Together, Carnegie UK - P. Coutts, H. Ormston, L. Pennycook, B. Thurman, 2020.



These hubs could have a longer term role in recovery from the pandemic, connecting people to a range of services to promote individual and community wellbeing. One of the case studies used in their research was the North Yorkshire Community Support Organisation put in place by North Yorkshire County Council and the local VCS which showed that community hubs can be a vehicle through which resilient communities are supported as a preventive approach to tackling enduring issues. One of the sample of community buildings taking part in our research became one of these community hubs in North Yorkshire.

However, returning to my concerns when on my yoga mat, community buildings have felt the impact of the lockdown, still are doing and will do for some time to come. An account by Adrian Bell of the experiences of Manchester Settlement³ in March 2020, described the income reducing by £4,000 per week as they lost revenue from childcare provision and room rental. They struggled with shifting and contradictory guidance as they applied for funding and explored government schemes. They have a sense that partner organisations are reviewing their use of community buildings, balancing risks to staff and the needs of the community. Partners are not rushing to resume service delivery from community spaces, leaving owners and managers of those spaces trying to hang on until the revenue returns. The Settlement has obeyed the earlier exhortations to diversify income streams and earn their own income, using that trading income as a buffer against the uncertainty of reliance on grant income and whims of funders. They consider this might be a good time to rethink this wisdom.



“Overnight, charities such as ours, that thought they had enhanced their resilience through increasing earned income, found that same resilience corroded, and their ability to fund core operations severely hindered, due to their diligence in following what was, at that time, best practice.”

ADRIAN BELL, MANCHESTER SETTLEMENT

3. “When the funds dry up” - Adrian Bell, Manchester Settlement in No Going Back Report. Voices from Manchester’s voluntary, community and social enterprise sector on the response to COVID 19 and their thoughts for the future. Macc 2020.



He calls for detailed discussion about the role of community spaces, to develop a shared vision for community buildings to ensure that those opportunities many organisations currently take advantage of to reach into communities, will no longer be there.

A regular barometer is being maintained by a partnership of Nottingham Trent University, Sheffield Hallam University and NCVO⁴ of the impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary sector. The latest report in November 2020 reported on the 639 responses received, 68% of which were from local organisations. 14% of respondents are anticipating closure within the next year; 39% have seen a deterioration in their situation within the past month and 38% expect their situation to deteriorate within the next month and 54% expect the pandemic to have a moderate negative impact in delivering objectives by this time next year. Meanwhile, 57% of them are experiencing an increased demand on their services.

57% of them are experiencing an increased demand on their services.

4. Respond, Reset, Recover, NTU Centre for People, Work and Organisational Practice, November 2020





2. Methodology

Community Matters was in touch with members throughout the whole period and put out a call for those responsible for running community buildings to take part in an interview which took place by phone or video and the conversation recorded with their permission. An open conversation was held, covering:

- **A description of their building, history and provision;**
- **Their actions during lockdown and access to grant funding;**
- **Their plans for re-opening;**
- **Their potential financial position;**
- **Their position in relation to the return of trustees and volunteers.**

Twenty organisations volunteered to take part and two others who had carried out some inspiring work were approached for their involvement. Over half of them were large centres, often with sports halls and nursery facilities and included a former police station, school, library, nursing home and one existing community library, many of them having gone through a process of community asset transfer in the recent past. The rest ranged from traditional village halls to smaller centres, one of which had developed from a house and garage. The geographical spread covered Hartlepool, Newcastle and North Tyneside in the north east; to West Lancashire and Manchester in the north west; through North, South and West Yorkshire; to settlements in the south east, in Buckinghamshire, Salisbury and Maidstone; and Taunton in the south west; covering Oxford and London in between. We also carried out two interviews with people in Wales, such is the power of Zoom!

The circumstances in which the buildings developed varied widely. Some had responded to the closure of the shipyards to provide education, and to high local levels of unemployment. Some had been purpose built by local authorities; others converted from a previous use. One had been built by a former mill owner for the recreation of his workers. Some were in regeneration areas; others in smaller rural settlements. Some have substantial staff teams including managers, admin staff and caretakers; others are run by a group of volunteer trustees and a part time cleaner.



We looked at accounts on the Charity Commission website and in terms of income, the respondents ranged from £1,500 per annum to £1.25 million. This demonstrates, on the one hand, how a service can be “provided on a shoestring”, and what contributions such buildings are making to the local economy, on the other – providing employment and stimulating income and investment. Finally, we looked at the organisations’ own websites, to explore their communication with the public during this period.





3. The Organisations Interviewed

Income levels

A graph is produced below, showing the varying incomes of community based organisations where it was available. This information is taken from the Charity Commission web site using the latest accounts submitted or was information provided during the interview. This shows the diverse range of community space that exists across the country, the significant amount of social capital produced out of a small amount of financial capital and the income generated by letting space and developing community based business, all of which was suddenly under threat.

COMMUNITY BUILDING	INCOME BAND
Whitton Village Hall Chaldon Village Hall	£1-5,000 per annum
North Watford Community Centre Westerhope Community Centre	£5-20,000
Hilda Lane Community Association	£20-50,000
Chalfont St. Giles Memorial Hall	£20-50,000
Greenhill Library Priorswood Community Centre Royston Community Centre Levenshulme Old Library Grenoside Community Centre	£50-100,000
Narberth and District Community Association Holmfirth Civic Hall Maidstone Community Centre West Oxford Community Association Glusburn Institute Auckland Youth and Community Centre	£100-500,000
	£500-£1m
Linskill Centre	Over £1m



How organisations kept their public informed

Some had no website of their own; others had nothing to indicate that life was any different from normal. A small number were keeping their public up to date with developments, announcing opening or reduced hours; others giving a date for re-opening; and some offering socially distanced events. Some of these explained what restrictions were in place and their risk assessment process. One gave phone numbers to ring for further information and another was offering small grants from a Carer's Hardship Fund. This was the organisation with almost the smallest income.

What happens within the centres

The range of activities carried out across the 22 organisations was impressive. This included:

- Nursery provision;
- Counselling;
- Craft groups;
- Dancing;
- Arts classes;
- Probation services;
- Soup kitchen;
- Free to good home table;
- Job club or other employability initiatives;
- Youth activities;
- Sports provision for all ages;
- Fitness classes;
- Room hire for training;
- Functions;
- Consultancy around business development;
- Sub-let to local businesses;
- Community radio;
- Pre-schools;
- Re-enactment;
- Bar and social club;
- Amateur dramatics;
- Cafes;
- Community health hub;
- Rooms used by mental health services;
- Credit Union;
- Family support groups;
- Office hire to voluntary organisations;
- French conversation;
- Performances;
- Film showings;
- Drop-ins for statutory bodies and Citizens Advice;
- Book groups;
- Farmers markets;
- Coffee mornings;
- Play reading;
- Open gardens;



Interviewees described their centre as

“absolutely humming before COVID, completely full all day long”

Some felt they were instrumental in addressing the issues of loneliness, “catching people before they get to a point of needing support”. One of the smallest centres had 700 users a week in normal times and described the centre provided a “cosy, warm, homely feeling”. The social capital generated by community spaces needs to be acknowledged and the gap that will be left in communities and neighbourhoods by their potential closure, recognised.





4. Lockdown Experience

Experiences in March 2020 varied from complete closure, to full-scale provision of a service to people in need. In between, there were those who kept childcare provision open for key workers, those who took the opportunity of an empty building to get maintenance and work done on the property, from decorating to major renovation, and those who kept some services running remotely. Reasons given for closing completely included:

- **The vulnerability of the people involved;**
- **COVID responses were being adequately made by other bodies in the locality;**
- **Building and improvement work was planned anyway, so this was a good time to close properly and allow it to happen. “We now have a kitchen to meet holiday food poverty requirements”;**
- **Perceived absence of poverty or need in the area;**
- **Lack of a strong volunteer base to do anything;**
- **A new heating system was planned and this provided an opportunity to have it installed;**
- **“We managed to get some Section 106 money released and used the opportunity to make the hall more welcoming for the future.”**

Some of those closed and carrying out maintenance and refurbishment, also secured funding to deliver activity packs to families, supported user groups in providing online sessions, and posted weekly activities on Facebook. Reports were received of community spaces being used to provide vital services such as Post Offices, food banks, storage for PPE or to become a base for a community COVID initiative.

“Those who stayed open, tailored their response to local need.”



CASE STUDY

PRIORSWOOD COMMUNITY CENTRE, TAUNTON

Priorswood Community Centre is only small but they teamed up with a local COVID support group and collected donated books to provide a book swap outside the centre between March and June, followed by a puzzle swap and then a toy swap. Fire damage to the front of the centre has now halted these activities. They describe themselves as having “been pretty busy”, phoning and emailing people they knew, carrying out food distribution, supporting other organisations, supporting the library to provide story time in the park, and keeping local notice boards up to date. They recruited 38 volunteers.

They described an older resident who came in every day for coffee and a chat with the volunteers and other community members. In late May, the centre manager discovered that she had died and, in discussion with the family, it transpired that, as her family all lived at a distance, her only social contact was via the community centre. Once lockdown had happened, she just shut down and stopped eating. In effect, she died of loneliness.





CASE STUDY

HILDA LANE COMMUNITY CENTRE

The initial reaction was to close the doors and start redundancy proceedings before the furlough scheme was introduced. All staff were furloughed apart from their community organiser, who spent her time producing food boxes for youth club members and other local people. As a result of local leafleting, between 20 and 30 volunteers were recruited to help with picking up prescriptions and provide support to people who were isolating. By co-operating with other local organisations, they were able to collect food donations and put out food boxes for up to 20 people, until they were able to get to the shops again.

Contact is being maintained with a group of volunteers recruited. Their plan is to use some of the funding raised over the summer to provide first aid training and involve some of those volunteers with the aim of providing a bank of first aiders for events, et cetera.

Successful funding bids were made to the Big Issue Invest Fund for COVID recovery, which will help with making up the loss of their major hiring for social events and parties. It will also employ someone for six months to develop new services, such as hot desking for people working from home, and providing them with some services. Some will also be invested in improving the broadband within the centre.





Activities and services developed included:

- Developing telephone networks between centre users;
- Admin staff becoming a representative for the local authority and giving out links to services and collecting food for food banks (North Yorkshire);
- Community radio broadcasts through remote working;
- Connecting creative groups through online sessions;
- A community cafe that put out feelers in the community and found out new ways of making money by running deliveries. “They worked flat out for six months”;
- Used by local churches as a food hub;
- Provision of some activities by Zoom;
- Keeping in contact with centre users by knocking on doors and checking on their welfare;
- Maintaining an occasional presence on Facebook and running Zoom coffee mornings and play readings which continued once restrictions were lifted;
- Buildings kept open for statutory workers, such as mental health teams.

The following case study is of a community centre that stayed open to meet the needs of the local community but are now facing reduced income as they re-open.





CASE STUDY

GREENHILL COMMUNITY CENTRE, WEST LANCASHIRE

This became a Scrub Hub for five months, which supported people mostly sewing from home but some working from the centre, supplying them with donated materials, collecting the finished goods, distributing them to where they were needed. All that was produced was donated to hospitals and residential homes because of the commissioning and procurement rules that precluded them from selling to them. The people involved were no longer isolated as they were seeing a volunteer each day.

As a physical staff presence was therefore needed in the Hub, people who felt vulnerable got in touch and they were able to be referred to other agencies. The manager also identified two local people experiencing poor mental health as a result of the lockdown and was able to involve them in volunteering during that time. She told a number of stories of people who were suicidal that they were able to help. They also supported the local food bank in ensuring that people were fed throughout. The result of the work put into this support, and into keeping up to date with requirements, has been that there has been no spare capacity to apply for additional funding. Cash flow was good in the beginning, but staff and running costs have still had to be paid and the £10,000 Retail, Leisure and Hospitality grant is unlikely to cover costs for a full year.

By the end of the summer, they were £10,000 down. Bookings were coming back – both old and new – but all are experiencing issues with accommodating the numbers they need to make the figures work, with social distancing rules. How do groups afford to pay someone with reduced numbers?





CASE STUDY

WEST OXFORD COMMUNITY CENTRE

This is a medium sized community centre with four rooms to rent out and a café on site, run by local people as a separate enterprise. Before lockdown, they were sending out an average of 100 invoices per month, to both locally based and national organisations using the centre. On March 24th, their income dropped to zero.

However, the café proved to be remarkably agile and ran deliveries, putting out feelers in the local community and finding new ways of making money. The café staff worked flat out for six months. Meanwhile, Oxford City Council set up a hub in the centre, registering people as volunteers and street champions. A member of the centre staff was seconded to the City Council for a while, to enable this to happen. As a result, good relationships were established between both bodies, with the City Council seeing the value of having local people on the ground and adopting this as a model of future working. The Community Association, as a result, is exploring the expansion of its catchment area to include greater areas of need.





CASE STUDY

WEST WATFORD COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

This was developed from a former shop and garage into a community centre in 1973 by Italian immigrants. Although a small charity, they would have approximately 700 users in normal times. They foresaw what was happening in March and shut early, but never furloughed anyone, keeping in contact with people as much as possible, knocking on local people's doors and checking on them.





5. The Current Position Of Organisations Interviewed

Interviews were carried out during September and October of 2020 when we found that some had opened as early as June, when childcare could open again, and some had not yet opened, aiming for October. At the time of writing the report, the second lockdown had started, forcing community venues to close their doors once again under a fresh set of restrictions. The extent of re-opening obviously had implications for the financial resilience of the organisations. Some had opened almost fully and had attracted both new and old customers back into the building, while others were being under-utilised for a number of reasons, including the age group of regular users and the size of rooms available, as well as the layout of the building. The implications of these factors on the cash flow, the financial reserves, and the future of the buildings and the provision they make, is discussed below. Reports are already being received of halls closing their doors for good.⁵

Some buildings opened very early in June where they were providing childcare, and others were still planning their re-opening for the autumn, at the time of the interview. One got their detached youth work project up and running as soon as they could, working with PCSOs, identifying hot-spots of need and developed Street Games outdoors in September, with the aim of moving indoors at half term. Some faced calls from local people and previous users to re-open, with reports of regular users being “amazingly supportive”. One has welcomed their Little Theatre group back and secured some Arts Council funding, which allowed them to do some live streaming. We gathered a number of reports of activities re-starting, such as badminton, line dancing, Zumba, exercise classes, yoga, children’s dance groups.

The extent of re-opening obviously had implications for the financial resilience of the organisations

5. Report of Village Halls Advisor to the AGM of Humber and Wolds Rural Action



A number of practical issues around re-opening included:

Buildings issues

- A lack of windows in the building to allow proper ventilation;
- Vulnerability of empty buildings has led to additional expenditure on security measures;
- Some groups wanting to return but unwilling to pay full rent as their own numbers would be low;
- The cost of heating, lighting and maintaining big old buildings;
- Conversely, the capacity of small buildings to cope with restrictions;
- Staff returning to work and then having to isolate.

User issues

- Sufficiency of risk assessments of user groups;
- Awareness by others of social distancing requirements;
- How one-way systems would be policed;
- Where community cafes were re-opened, footfall was low;
- Those who let rooms out as office space have found the 'working from home' issue has lost them some users.





Safety issues

- **Volunteers not returning because of their age and perceived vulnerability;**
- **Opening is reliant on people feeling safe and ready to come back;**
- **Building users refusing to wear masks.**

Policy and guidance issues

- **Dependence of some groups on guidance from national bodies;**
- **Problems with “Track and Trace”;**
- **Having to adopt a closed door policy in order to police who comes in and out;**
- **The amount of work involved in full risk assessments;**
- **Contradictory information coming from the government;**
- **Local specific restrictions.**

Respondents were particularly concerned about the confusing information about what the restrictions were that they are supposed to abide by and were trying to keep up with issues around the ‘rule of six’ but also exemptions that applied to educational activities and voluntary and community sector meetings and gatherings. The sources of information most used by people to keep abreast of developments were ACRE and Community Matters.

Respondents were particularly concerned about the confusing information about what the restrictions were



CASE STUDY

GREENHILL COMMUNITY LIBRARY, SHEFFIELD

The library was transferred by Sheffield City Council to community ownership, since when it has developed to be 'more than just books' offering a range of facilities and activities to support the local community. In common with all libraries, it closed its doors in March 2020 and have slowly and cautiously opened as a library since. However, from mid July, they ran a number of activities to ensure that local people knew they were still there. These included the regular Friday talks by Zoom, both a virtual and an actual open garden event (observing social distancing), a scarecrow competition, a story walk in both areas covered by the library with laminated pages of a children's book in 13 locations, story telling sessions in the school holidays with socially distanced family groups on the library grass.





6. New Funding Brought In

Many funders re-purposed their funding streams in March in a rapid response to the lockdown, knowing that voluntary and community organisations were going to be at the forefront of meeting needs created by the lockdown. All community buildings were entitled to the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure grants of £10,000 or £25,000 depending upon rateable value of the premises, which was unrestricted funding. Organisations interviewed had differing experiences of raising new funds, with at least one stating that they had no time to make funding applications as their time was taken up with delivering a service.

Respondents, who had the time and knowledge, used the time created by lockdown imaginatively to develop some resources to enable them to respond to the immediate situation and to develop for the future. A range of different funding sources were secured.

Others did have considerable success though in applying for small grants from a variety of sources including:

- **Virgin Money – which was unrestricted so could be split between running costs and projects;**
- **A small grant to deliver activity packs to families;**
- **Ecclesiastical;**
- **Early release of S106 money;**
- **£5,000 from Parish Council;**
- **£3,000 from Sports Council and £25,000 from the Arts Council;**
- **A small grant to fund Zoom activities and pay some salary;**
- **£30,000 from Welsh Assembly;**
- **£25,000 from Big Issue Invest to pay for future development work, as well as cleaning and broadband extension;**
- **Many put staff on furlough and thus saved staff wages but not everyone was able to do that.**



7. Financial Resilience

Although Charity Commission guidance suggests keeping three months' worth of reserves, most of those involved in the research kept six months or more in hand. This was encouraging as recent research by the Third Sector Research Centre found that 43% of organisations kept less than three months in reserves and some less than that⁶. They found that the older the organisation, the larger the reserves, which makes sense as they have had longer to amass some money in the bank. There are already reports of smaller organisations closing or staff moving from paid to voluntary. While we would always argue that this sort of incident is just what reserves are for, it is still quite concerning to hear that some of those reserves have gone to pay cash flow already, particularly in the bigger centres with greater overheads, one of which is an annual insurance bill of over £3,500. Others did not furlough their staff and have therefore had to incur staff costs during this time.

“by Easter, we will be pretty well down in the bank”

There was talk of handing the building back to the local authority or transferring the asset to another community organisation (which begs the question of what the business plan will look like by then).

Those that opened during the summer found that their income level had not returned to anticipated levels. In some cases, this was because only some of their rooms were large enough to make activities financially viable, because of the distancing rules; others were largely used by groups of older people who felt unsafe returning to social activities. Others were confused by the ever-changing rules and how they applied to organisations using their space, e.g the Rule of Six.

6. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/publications/assessing-financial-reserves.pdf> Assessing the Financial Reserves of English and Welsh Charities on the Eve of the Covid-19 Pandemic, by David Clifford of the University of Southampton and John Mohan of the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham. 2020


One interviewee described their realisation that:



“it will go on for a long time and we can’t make enough money from the two rooms big enough to cover our costs”

A Welsh respondent described being in a much better position as a result of a £30,000 grant from the Welsh Assembly. They were able to open their nursery and gym, all with reduced numbers of users and increased numbers of staff, highlighting an additional issue of the increased costs of additional staff and cleaning responsibilities. All lettings had to have at least 30 minutes (some places an hour) between bookings, to enable cleaning of rooms to take place, thus reducing lettable time.

Six months seemed to be the optimum time for organisations to be able to manage. Most were confident “provided there is no further shutdown” (this report is being written just as the second one was announced). They were also conscious of the significance of the service they provided to their local community as illustrated by the story told to us by the people running Priorswood Community Centre in Taunton.



“if we did close, it would have an impact on local people; there is a lot we would cease to support local people with”

North Watford Community Association describe themselves as **“very much at the heart of the local community – there would be uproar if we shut; people would be devastated”**.

Others were hopeful for the future, having significant reserves, so secure for this year but wary of furlough ending (again extended twice during the course of writing this report), and the need to build up a reserve for the next “rainy day”. Some were benefiting from other local facilities not yet being in a position to open and taking their bookings. These were “probably bringing in enough” and just about breaking even – “will tick along for quite some time”.



As Narberth Community Association put it,

“it’s just a question of money”

Efforts were being made by a number of the associations to redress the balance, including:

- Developing a social media presence to raise their profile;
- Setting up Just Giving pages;
- Actively promoting the centre with potential users;
- Looking for grants to plug the gaps;
- Seeking capital investment, both to put in video conferencing facilities and to reduce their carbon footprint and therefore their costs;
- Securing Arts Council funding to pay for live streaming;
- Using the time whilst closed to carry out repairs, decorating and structural work, to render the building more attractive;
- Spending lockdown time on business development.





8. The Implications Of Lockdown On Community Buildings

The more positive were reflected in the quote

“we are hopeful for the future, we’ve got strength within the community and remain hopeful”

This reflects the sentiments of Adrian Bell at the Manchester Settlement quoted below:

“Through the hard work and flexibility of the staff and trustees, the charity will ride this storm for as long as there is a place for community settings in the world.”





However, others were saying:

“...we don't know what our future will be like”

Some were saying that:

“They could survive until the 31st March by relying on reserves put by for improving the building.”

“We have six months life left as we stand at the moment.”

“If we're shut down until Christmas, we're in trouble.”

“We were seeing takings going upwards; if we shut down again completely, we will have problems in the New Year.”





9. Conclusions

1. Community spaces, in all their different guises, create a significant amount of social capital and contribute substantially towards the wellbeing of both communities and the people who live there. Those in a position to do so during the first lockdown, demonstrated this in a range of creative and imaginative ways, supporting people who were often alone and isolated. The sad story of a user of Priorswood Community Centre in North Taunton reflects the importance of community spaces in peoples' lives.
2. There are examples throughout this report, both of the extreme caution and professionalism applied in re-opening, in terms of carrying out risk assessments and putting safety measures in place, and of the willingness to be up and running again to deliver services and space. Effort has been put into applying for funding where time allowed, developing ideas for the future and promoting the building. Some associations have paid managers who have worked throughout; others are run by volunteers who have undertaken this work, as well as all the safety measures.
3. It is clear that, whilst community associations and village halls and others have been prudent in putting aside reserves and have used their Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants to supplement cash flow or improve and maintain the building, they never envisaged this situation being so long lasting. As the second lockdown is in progress, there is evidence of some organisations reaching the near end of their financial reserves.
4. Shifting and contradictory guidance has created problems for a number of organisations, especially those with no paid staff or where staff have been furloughed. As plans have been made, so restrictions have changed again.





5. The trend towards virtual and remote meetings is having a real impact on the lettings of venues such as those we interviewed, as former users see themselves saving both time and money by meeting by video conferencing instead of face to face, and as activities such as yoga and keep fit are delivered on line.
6. The past twenty years has seen a trend towards community organisations being persuaded of the wisdom of generating their own income rather than relying on grant income and many have done so though room lettings, event management and small social enterprises such as community cafes. It is the organisations that have followed that advice who are now facing an uncertain future.
7. The community buildings sector is facing a potential crisis as a second lockdown is in progress and there is no clear idea of what lays ahead in terms of either rates of infection or further restrictions. It is hard to contemplate a world without community space providing social events, opportunities of exercise and learning, space to try out new ideas or just somewhere to meet friends and prevent the sort of loneliness described above. The final case study below also demonstrates how important community spaces have been during the first lockdown and the gap that would have been left had there been none available.

“it is the organisations that have followed the advice who are now facing an uncertain future”





CASE STUDY

WHITTON VILLAGE HALL

Whitton Village Hall is a former school in a small village of about 95 houses in North Lincolnshire with a small annual turnover. During the first lockdown, they were approached by a local restaurateur who was closed and wanted to open a not for profit village shop from the hall. He recognised that some of the older residents were struggling and unable to get delivery slots from supermarkets and he had a cash and carry card at his disposal. The shop sold produce at cost price exclusively to people from the village to avoid undercutting local shops in other villages. Not only were people able to access shopping but they had an opportunity to communicate and talk to others and it provided a way of 'keeping an eye on people' who might have fallen below the radar. Surplus stock left at the end of the lockdown was purchased by the Parish Meeting and was donated to a food bank. The village hall provided the space for free and, in return, the Parish Meeting provided the funding for the redecoration of the hall when it was time to re-open.

Since re-opening, recognising that people need something to look forward to, the hall has run a scarecrow trail with socially distanced teas in the village hall and a produce show with a carefully planned one way system and adapted prize giving. The normal Hallowe'en party was replaced by displays of pumpkins and sweets left on doorsteps to prevent children missing out. "There are ways and means of doing things". Yoga classes had returned prior to the second lockdown but they are missing the income they receive from parties and their own events. They know that their future wholly depends on the lifting of the lockdown and when they can be allowed to let the hall again. With a turnover of about £1,500 per annum, the village hall is good value in terms of the social capital it produces for that small amount of money.



Call For Action

Throughout the pandemic, a number of sectors have highlighted the impact it has had on them, including arts and culture, retail and hospitality and care and have seen some response from the Government. It is now the turn of the community buildings and spaces to raise concerns for their future and the important contribution they make to our economy, the wellbeing of people and the communities they live in and the social capital they produce. The Community Wellbeing Index⁷ has demonstrated a positive link between social space and overall wellbeing in the UK. As the number of social spaces increases, the higher are the wellbeing scores recorded. For some time, Locality has run a Save Our Spaces⁸ campaign to save public buildings and spaces by promoting greater community ownership and the Co-op has partnered with Locality in Endangered Space⁹ to support and improve at risk community spaces. It is estimated that there are already 16,000 public and community spaces under threat by 2022 including libraries, leisure centres and youth clubs even before the effects of the pandemic hit.

Our voices need to be added to those above to ensure that they are heard alongside those of the Rural Coalition¹⁰ which is demanding more equitable funding in rural areas to support post COVID recovery. Of the ten lessons they have learnt from the pandemic, number six is the value of community assets, including village halls, which are still constrained in their ability to operate. They are proposing capital funding for both start up and growth and an extended Village Halls Improvement Grant with an allowance built in to support applicants. We would like to see that support extended to the many urban centres that have provided a lifeline to people throughout the pandemic (and before) who are now coping with limited reserves and facing further months without bookings and the associated income.

7. <https://communitywellbeing.coop.co.uk/>

8. <https://locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/save-our-spaces/>

9. <https://colleaguestories.coop.co.uk/2019/06/28/weve-officially-launched-our-endangered-spaces-campaign/>

10. Rebuilding Rural: Growing Back Better. The Rural Coalition, 2020.



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- **Glusburn Institute, North Yorkshire**
- **Greenhill Library Sheffield**
- **Grenoside Community Centre, Sheffield**
- **Hartlepool People**
- **Hilda Lane Community Association, SE London**
- **Holmfirth Civic Hall**
- **Leverhulme Old Library**
- **Linskill Centre, North Tyneside**
- **Maidstone Community Centre**
- **Narberth and District Community Association, Pembrokeshire**
- **North Watford Community Centre**
- **Priorswood Community Centre, Taunton**
- **Royston Community Centre, Hertfordshire**
- **The Granville, London**
- **West Oxford Community Association**
- **Westerhope Community Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne**
- **Whitton Village Hall, North Lincolnshire.**



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