

Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Affairs

Community facilities in rural Scotland: a study of their use, provision and condition

Sarah Skerratt, Marsaili MacLeod, Clare Hall, Ron Duncan, Mike Strachan, Janice Harris (SAC), Malcolm Moseley (CCRI) and Jane Farmer (UHI).

Rural community facilities (RCFs) are an important part of the social fabric of rural Scotland. This primary research gathered extensive survey data about the location, condition and use of these community hubs that will support informed debate about their possible futures.

Main Findings

A database of 861 rural community facilities was collated; 322 of these responded to a postal survey. The results of this and qualitative research are summarised.

- Four-fifths of surveyed RCFs are owned by the community; less than 20% by local authorities. Almost 66% reported that they needed improvement to be “fit for purpose” or compliant with legislation; and 66% are more than 50 years old.
- Around 50% had received information from the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator or from Federations of Village Halls; local authorities provide support and advice to around 39% and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) support to 35%; 25% had received advice from compliance authorities.
- Many RCF management committees have difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers. This seems to be due to the perceived bureaucratic and legislative burdens of the role and a more general apathy or reluctance to be involved.
- Under 25% of committees had prepared a business plan in the past five years; two-thirds have no annual budget preparation. Almost none had received relevant training in the past year; less than 20% had attended workshops, conferences or networking events.
- Around 33% of RCFs run with a deficit (from less than £1,000 to £16,000). Regular income from room and hall hire and lets is fundamental to their financial sustainability.
- Over 75% of RCFs received funds from one to five different sources in the last five years - more than 60% from local government, a third from the National Lottery Fund, half from charitable trusts. Almost 20% received no funding in the past five years.
- Funding: amounts range from under £2,000 to £3 million; they tend to be for capital rather than revenue needs and come from a very wide range of sources.
- The main fuel source for two-thirds is electricity, with oil for one-fifth. A minority have a renewable energy installation, less than half have energy saving measures in place.
- RCFs serve principally as a venue for community activities. Less than a fifth are venues for public services (such as local authority and NHS services or a post office).

Background

Rural community facilities (RCFs) are local assets which serve as central points or “hubs”, and as venues for service provision, from within and outwith the community, sometimes providing for the co-location of multiple services.

The main aims of the project were to gather and analyse data on the current provision and condition of rural community facilities and to assess the levels and nature of their use. Its objectives were to:

- update existing facilities contact-information;
- review the advice and support available to management committees;
- review sources and levels of funding;
- gather primary baseline information on use, income, management, insurance, condition, energy efficiency and heating;
- explore the buildings’ different uses and their importance to the delivery of a range of activities in a community;
- explore the economic sustainability and value of multi-service facilities compared to those with a single purpose.

SCVO collaborated on the project, providing both information and an initial RCF contacts database. The research took place very shortly after the launch of Rural Direct under the Scotland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 (SRDP). Rural Direct offers advice, across rural Scotland, on funding sources and how to access them. The findings on sources of information and funding and advice, therefore, refer to the situation before the full operational establishment of Rural Direct.

Methods

The main project activities were:

- a desk review of literature and policy documents;
- updating the SCVO’s contacts database for RCFs;
- a review of a funding sources database;
- a postal survey (August-September 2008) sent to the named contact for 861 facilities and completed by 322 respondents;
- stakeholder interviews with nine funders and advisers;
- detailed case studies of six facilities, which included in-depth interviews with committee and other community members.

Main Findings

Key findings from across the different research activities are summarised here.

The condition and maintenance of the buildings

Two-thirds of the surveyed facilities are more than 50 years old and almost two-thirds reported that they require improvements, to make them “fit for purpose” or to comply with legislation.

Rising fuel costs inevitably increase running costs for the buildings. The main source of fuel for two-thirds of surveyed buildings is electricity, with oil for one-fifth. A minority have renewable energy installations and less than half have energy conservation measures.

Surveyed premises were more likely to be adapted for people with mobility problems than for those with hearing or sight disabilities.

Ownership

Four-fifths of surveyed facilities are owned by the local community; less than one fifth are owned by a local authority, which may have implications for how buildings are managed (and perceived) by the local community.

Management and governance

The majority of committees meet at least quarterly, but 25% meet only once or twice a year. The majority of committees have difficulty in recruiting and retaining volunteers for the management and running of the facility.

Survey respondents expressed concern at the ‘amount of red tape’ in relation to risk assessments, energy audits and health and safety audits, for example.

Less than one fifth of respondent committees had prepared a business plan in the past five years and two-thirds had no budget preparation year-on-year. Almost one third of respondents reported that their facility has a budget deficit. Virtually no committees had received training in business planning, management or governance in the past year; less than one-fifth had been to workshops, conferences or networking events. This finding supports a general perception amongst those involved in RCFs and stakeholders that the longer term sustainability of many facilities presents a considerable challenge and raises the issue of where there may be unidentified or unmet needs for capacity-building, especially given the increased pressure for strategic business planning from potential funders.

Over three quarters received funds from one to five funding sources in the last five years. The biggest funders were local authorities and the national lottery; funding is also available through the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) including LEADER.

User populations

Surveyed facilities serve a wide age-range of people: over three-quarters are used by young and elderly people; more than half provide a venue for parents and toddlers.

Facility uses

A principal purpose of the facilities surveyed is to provide a venue for community activities. Less than one-fifth host public services (such as a library, local authority services, a post office, a GP surgery or other health services).

Conclusions

In analysing findings from across the various research activities, it has been possible to identify a number of recurrent themes. These may have implications for policy and practice, at various levels, for individual committees and their members or for regional and national organisations that advise and support RCFs, directly or indirectly.

Sharing of best practice for RCFs in Scotland

Despite the considerable challenges to their ongoing sustainability that many facilities are facing, there are plentiful (and often unrecognised) examples of good practice and imaginative approaches to finding solutions. Further consideration should be given on how to successfully:

- share experiences and advice in relation to the facilities' physical condition and maintenance;
- provide assistance, guidance and templates in relation to administrative and regulatory responsibilities;
- share experiences of how management committees could be encouraged to build on their existing "catchments" through, perhaps, more diverse service delivery, for health, education or governance;
- share good practice on better engagement with the wider community.

RCFs as public service venues

Given the Scottish Government's 2008 report *Delivering for Remote & Rural Health*¹ and 2007 Action Plan *Better Health, Better Care*,² and findings from this research, there may be scope for innovative ways of providing greater access to health services through these buildings. It may be worthwhile considering whether there could or should be greater partnership between public sector service providers and rural community facilities

Location

As well as understanding local needs, committees need to be aware of their proximity to other service venues and providers that could complement or compete with them and the implications this has for business planning and their longer-term sustainability.

Buildings investment

The research found that a high proportion of buildings had unsatisfactory or unsuitable physical fabric, and high running costs associated with the energy forms used and poor energy efficiency. Rural Direct provides advice on how to access funding from a variety of sources, including the SRDP – Rural Priorities and LEADER, which can be used for this.

Advice and support to RCFs

The findings suggest that RCF committees might benefit from improved, readily available support, of a consistent standard, particularly in relation to: energy conservation and renewables; legislation and regulatory responsibilities; business and budget planning; and the evaluation of their potential to be multi-service outlets where appropriate.

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/05/06084423/0>

² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/12/11103453/0>

This document, along with “Community facilities in rural Scotland: a study of their use, provision and condition” the full research report of the project and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Social Research website at: www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch. If you have any further queries about social research, or would like further copies of this Research Findings summary document, please contact us at socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or telephone 0131 244 7573.



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