

Halls for All

Support Rural Scotland's Community Buildings



Briefing

Introduction

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) estimate that there are upwards of 3,000 village and community halls in Scotland. Village halls are inclusive community spaces that perform a vital role in rural areas. Halls are valued public assets, a focus for community activity and house a range of community services. They are largely owned by communities and run by volunteer management committees who face increasing challenges to maintain and improve the fabric of the buildings, generate a sustainable income, comply with an ever increasing burden of legislation and maintain volunteer support in a wider climate of reduced local and national funding and assistance.

Challenges facing halls

Support

In comparison to England and Northern Ireland, support for halls in Scotland is poor. Although good work is done by some local authorities, Councils for Voluntary Service, Local Rural Partnerships and Federations of Halls, there is a well established need for a national support service available to all. Existing support networks are unable to provide the sustained support needed to work with halls. A support service would provide information, training, technical building support, a national halls database and condition surveys. It would extend and develop existing support networks and SCVO's village halls website. Comprehensive village hall support services are provided in both England and Northern Ireland and it is time for their value to be recognised in Scotland.

Condition

The oldest halls are pre-Victorian, with noticeable peaks of further building as war memorials in 1919-26, again in 1950-56 and from the 21st Century Halls for Scotland programme in 2000. Local knowledge suggests a large proportion of halls are in poor condition. Lack of funding can lead to a downward spiral of reduced maintenance, poor condition, reduced use, reduced income and so on. A national survey of halls would be useful to determine the extent of problems. The rating revaluation planned for 2007-08 also provides a good opportunity to identify halls as a distinct type of property and contribute to the quality and coverage of the developing SCVO halls database.

Volunteers

Village halls rely on volunteer management committees. Recent population decline and ageing populations in some rural areas have affected retention, recruitment and replacement of volunteers.

Increased costs

Cost increases, particularly for fuel and energy, and the ever increasing costs of meeting new statutory obligations are causing considerable concern to management committees.

Fuel

Halls are facing sharp increases in fuel costs. Those most affected are rural halls away from mains gas supplies and reliant on oil, bottled gas or electric heating.

There is a pressing need, especially for older halls, for capital funds to increase insulation standards, install more efficient heating systems and renewable energy generation technologies. These can reduce costs, increase comfort levels, protect the fabric of the building and lead to increased hall use (particularly by pre-school, elderly and disabled groups) with subsequent increased revenue and more inclusive communities.

Renewable energy generation supported by the Scottish Executive's Scottish Community and Householders Renewables Initiative (SCHRI) is being demonstrated and evaluated in a number of halls.

Water Charges

Water charges are payments made to Scottish Water to cover water supply, sewage disposal and surface water drainage charges.

Water charges are extremely contentious. To gain exemption, charities must satisfy all of six criteria laid down in the exemption scheme established by Scottish Executive Ministers in 2002. They include a requirement for the occupation of the premises by the same charity at 31st March 1996 and 31 March 1999. This has led to new build halls not qualifying for exemption, leading to significant hardship. Relief under the present arrangements is planned to continue until 2010.

A fair relief scheme for all charities is needed that will maintain the exemption beyond 2010. One of the recommendations of the Scottish Charity Law Review Commission (commonly known as the 'McFadden Commission') in 2001 was that all Scottish registered charities should automatically qualify for water charges relief.

VAT

The burden of VAT on work involving halls remains a constant source of difficulty. Most halls are not able to reclaim VAT. An obvious inequity is that local authority owned community centres and halls operate on a VAT free basis and yet community groups who take over the operation of such halls to keep them going lose that financial advantage.

New build halls are currently exempt from VAT but, in the current funding climate, smaller scale renovations and refurbishment are much more common and are liable to VAT.

The applicability of the 2005 budget concession of 5% VAT for war memorials to the 150 halls in Scotland expressly built as war memorials is currently being clarified.

Building costs

Building costs have significantly increased in recent years and high quality multipurpose buildings frequently cost over £1million. Even modest improvements and maintenance can severely stretch the resources of hall committees.

Funding climate

Village halls have had past access to a range of possible funding sources, which reflected their public value and contribution to active communities. Far fewer funding opportunities are now available. A national village halls fund is required to put Scottish halls on a similar footing to halls in England and Northern Ireland. The Big Lottery Community Buildings Fund in England is investing £50 million in community centres and village halls and the Improving Community Buildings scheme in Northern Ireland is a £5 million fund to refurbish and modernise community buildings. There are no equivalent funds in Scotland. Equivalent provision in Scotland would require a fund of some £10 million per annum.

Local authorities

Some local authorities continue to provide revenue grants towards annual operating costs and some still consider contributing to major refurbishment or new build costs. The impact of their intervention has, however, been reduced by the closure of the Scottish Rural Partnership Fund Local Capital Grants Scheme that match funded council input.

The National Lottery

Substantial help was afforded to the 55 Halls that benefited from the 21st Century Halls for Scotland scheme but the good work begun by that initiative has not continued. Quite a number of halls applied successfully for funding from the former Community Fund/NLCB (now the Big Lottery Fund), and some have secured funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, where they are listed buildings. In more recent times, though, village halls have occupied a low policy priority in Scotland,

despite their obvious contribution to community life and social inclusion. The Growing Community Assets strand of Investing in Communities, for example, will only fund halls that have the potential to generate income for additional community benefit or be central to the delivery of a range of key services. Buildings used as meeting spaces or for sporting provision are unlikely to meet their outcomes.

Scottish Trusts and Foundations

A number of trusts and foundations in Scotland have a history of supporting hall building projects. The Robertson Trust, the Gannochy Trust and the feasibility work of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland's Community Grants Scheme have all done sterling work. However, Scottish trusts have seen a contraction in their total funds available for distribution, and this has led to an ongoing revisiting of priorities resulting in relatively small contributions towards individual projects.

Scottish Executive

The Scottish Rural Partnership Fund was, until 2005, a major source of funding for hall building projects through its Local Capital Grants Scheme. The scheme funded capital projects up to £100,000 with matched funding from local authorities. The fund was closed in 2005 subject to review. This left many halls high and dry as they had already agreed support from their local authority subject to matching from this fund. It is likely that some of these funds will be delivered through the Scottish Rural Development Programme to be finalised later in 2007, but it is not yet clear that any of this will be available to halls.

European Funding

European funding through structural funds has been an important part of funding for a number of halls. However, for most of Scotland it is unlikely there will be funds available for hall capital programmes from 2007 to 2013.

Compliance burdens

There has been a huge increase in the level of legislative compliance impacting on village halls. The raft of both recent and planned new compliance is placing real pressure on committee members, prompting some to resign. A review of, and reductions to, the burdens placed on hall committees by regulatory and monitoring bodies is required.

Important changes include:

- The Private Water Supply Regulations 2005
- Protection of Children (Scotland) Act 2003 and Protection of Vulnerable Groups Act 2007
- The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005
- Food Hygiene Regulations 2006
- Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 and Licensing of Door Stewards Act 2006
- The Planning Act 2006 and the impending new Building Regulations
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (amended 2005)

Summary

The demands set out above are daunting for volunteer members of hall committees and there is some unease at where the collective resource represented by halls in Scotland is headed. There is clearly a need to take stock and see the extent to which these concerns are shared across Scotland.

This e-petition is an opportunity to bring attention to an issue that is increasing in scale and complexity. Strong support for this e-petition would enable the issues raised to be taken forward with the Scottish Executive, CoSLA, Scottish funding bodies, trusts and foundations and regulators.

The main needs of village and community halls are:

- A Village/Community Halls Fund to refurbish or modernise community venues to increase the level of community use and enhance the quality of services and activities provided that recognise the public value placed on halls for social cohesion and active communities especially in rural areas.

- A support service that would provide hard pressed committees with information, training, networking opportunities, technical building support, create a national halls database and undertake condition surveys.
- A fair relief scheme for water charges for all charities that will maintain the exemption beyond 2010
- Energy efficiency grants for halls available through the Scottish Energy Efficiency Office
- An increase in and safeguarding of SCHRI funding for community buildings
- A review of and reductions to the burdens placed on hall committees by regulatory and monitoring bodies

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations is the national body representing the voluntary sector. SCVO seeks to advance the values and shared interests of the voluntary sector. There are 50,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland, involving 120,000 paid staff and more than a million volunteers. The sector has an economic value of £2.6billion.

For further information visit:

www.scvo.org.uk

www.villagehalls.org.uk

www.ruralgateway.org.uk