

The role of Northumberland village halls in digitally connecting rural communities.

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1. Executive summary

In November 2020, Community Action Northumberland (CAN), using funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, commissioned a team of researchers in the Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University, to undertake a digital review of rural village halls in Northumberland. As a society we are aware of the explosion in need for access to digital services. What does this mean for rural areas with poor coverage? Is there a digital role for village halls in helping to connect rural communities in the future?

The research consisted of a number of components. Firstly, we conducted an overview of existing policy contexts and examples of best practice¹. The following elements of the research are detailed in this report. We then undertook a survey of village halls to establish the scale of their activities, their interest in broadband connection, and any perceived barriers. Next we did case studies of six village halls, three of which are not connected, two with very good digital connection, and one that is connected but previously has not used it. Finally, we chose two unconnected halls to identify their options for broadband connection.

Village halls and their trustees are exemplary examples of structures and people committed to community inclusion and cohesion. Halls undertake a vast array of activities, tailored to meet the needs of their community. They are flexible about opening hours, charge extremely low hire fees, and provide for very small numbers that other providers might not consider viable. Many are charities and as the findings show, spend a lot of time and energy fundraising to maintain their halls, and to provide services to their communities.

The research shows that halls are aware of the need to become digitally connected in the 'new world' and the role they can play as community digital hubs. It is imperative that

government and policy work quickly with the halls to enable them to take on this role. Recommendations are detailed at the end of the report. Here they are summarised:

Connection:

- Halls must be supported with the cost of installation and ongoing costs.
- Local providers should continue to be encouraged to provide these free of charge.
- Larger providers should introduce a charity rate for halls and other charities.

Connecting the community:

- Skills and training providers need to work with trustees to address community need.
- Training needs to build on existing best practice about how to engage communities.
- Digital champions have a key role going forward.
- The CAN portal should look to develop its training/ knowledge exchange potential.

Social inclusion:

- Digital halls can imaginatively address hidden rural poverty and low educational skills.

¹This is available on request.

2. Overview and introduction

Village halls play a central role in communities in England, and particularly in rural communities. There are an estimated 10,000 village halls in England, managing community assets of £3 billion². Over 180 of these halls are in Northumberland.

Community and a sense of belonging are important for our well-being, and this is true of rural villages. Populations are small, service centres are often distant and difficult to access and the provision of services and activities in the village is central to that sense of belonging. Village halls play a central role in integrating people and creating a feeling of togetherness. Village halls are run by volunteers. In general, they do not pay rent for their premises, but often have responsibility for the maintenance of the community asset they occupy. Halls tend to run a variety of classes and activities, and the village hall trustees are committed to responding to the needs of their community as best they can.

Through the various provisions they offer, village halls keep members of the community connected. This has become more important as services, private and public, are withdrawn from rural areas. Communities have always worried that the closure of schools, shops or post offices will damage their sense of community. In many cases, village halls have stepped into the breach to try and maintain provision of services.

During the pandemic, the ability to keep rural communities connected became even more important. What role could village halls play in keeping people connected? This brought the question of digital connection front and central. Access to good broadband and having the skills and confidence to use it became essential during the pandemic. How can village halls help?

Village halls have been the physical heart of communities, can they become the virtual heart?

In late 2020, Community Action Northumberland (CAN) commissioned a team of researchers in the Centre for Rural Economy in Newcastle University to undertake an over-arching digital review of village halls in Northumberland, and to identify the digital opportunities available and the options for implementation. The team undertook the following research:

- A survey of village halls in Northumberland.
- Six case studies of village halls.
- Two of these six case studies were chosen and the team worked with them to identify specific plans for the installation and adoption of digital services.

The report is structured as follows. Section two details the findings of the survey. Section three gives an overview of the case studies and focuses on the role of the village halls in their community, the digital village hall and the role of the hall in tackling issues of social isolation and deprivation. Section four details the options available to the two halls we worked with around installation and adoption of digital services. Section five offers conclusions and some recommendations. Appendices provide information on available training, accessing services identified by halls, and potential sources of funding.

²acre.org.uk

3. The survey

A realisation during the pandemic that internet connection could be a life-enhancer.

Lockdown has demonstrated how important digital connection is in small relatively remote communities like ours - we are aware now about the potential through internet connection to enhance existing use and develop use as a community internet hub.

The halls were surveyed over December 2020 and January 2021. There was a total of 99 responses (n=99), from halls in Northumberland. This section gives an overview of the results from the survey and discusses some of the findings. Firstly, those halls without internet will be examined, looking at why they currently have no provision and their future plans around connectivity. Secondly the results of the halls that do have internet will be discussed, this will include what they mainly use the internet for, who uses it and what devices they have in the hall.

The hall is a tourism venue and an internet connection could open up several possibilities in this field. Also, the hall is an emergency refuge in which a connection would help.

The initial question in the survey asked the respondents how often the hall was used prior to Covid-19, 82.3% selected 'very often' or 'fairly often', 12.5% choosing 'often'. The type of activities the halls were used for are displayed in the table one below. The most popular included fundraising events (86%), exercise classes (75%) and concerts (53.1%), these are all events which have not been possible during Covid, highlighting the loss of functionality these halls have experienced throughout the pandemic.

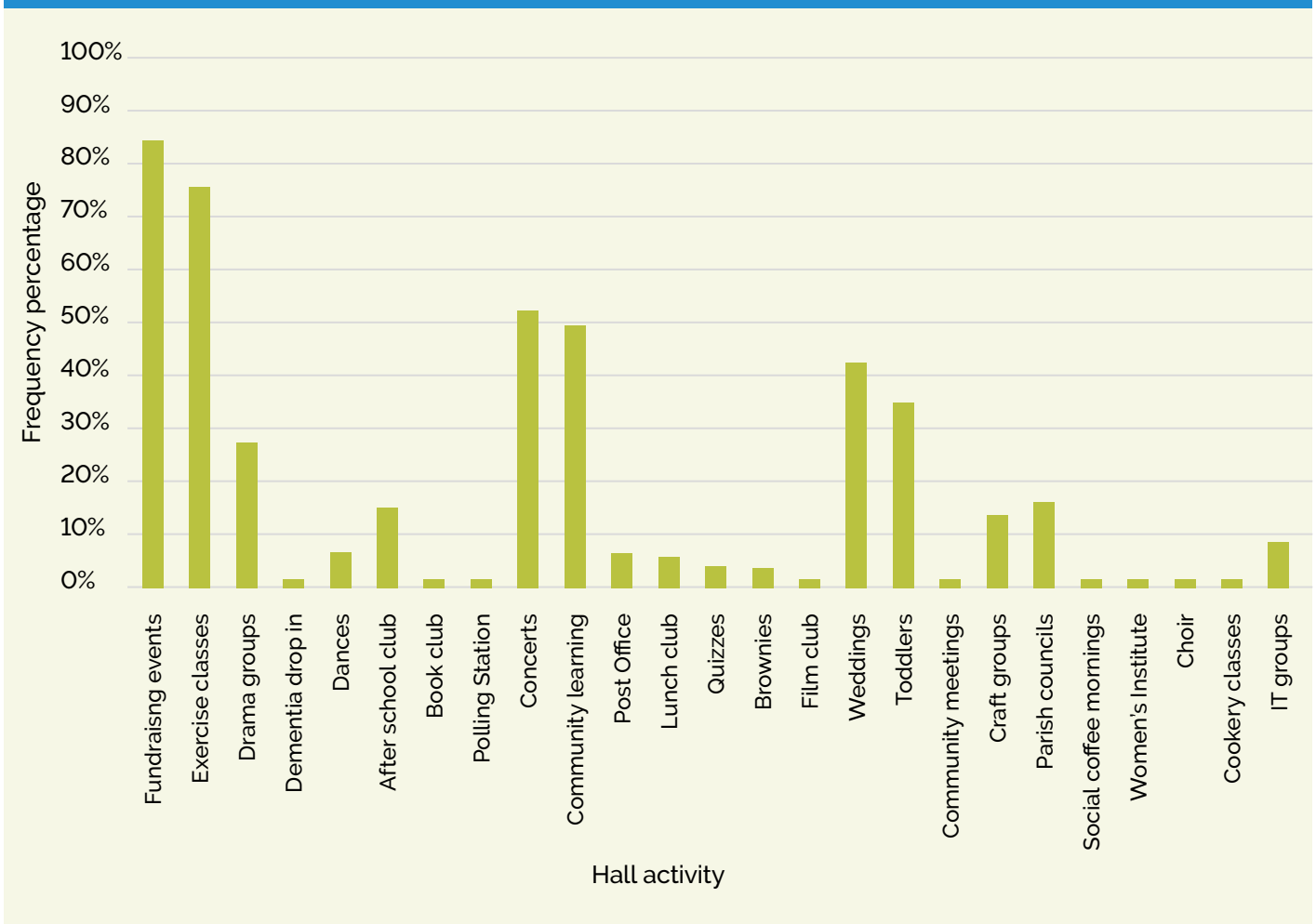
¹This is available on request.

3. The survey

Table 1: Hall activities

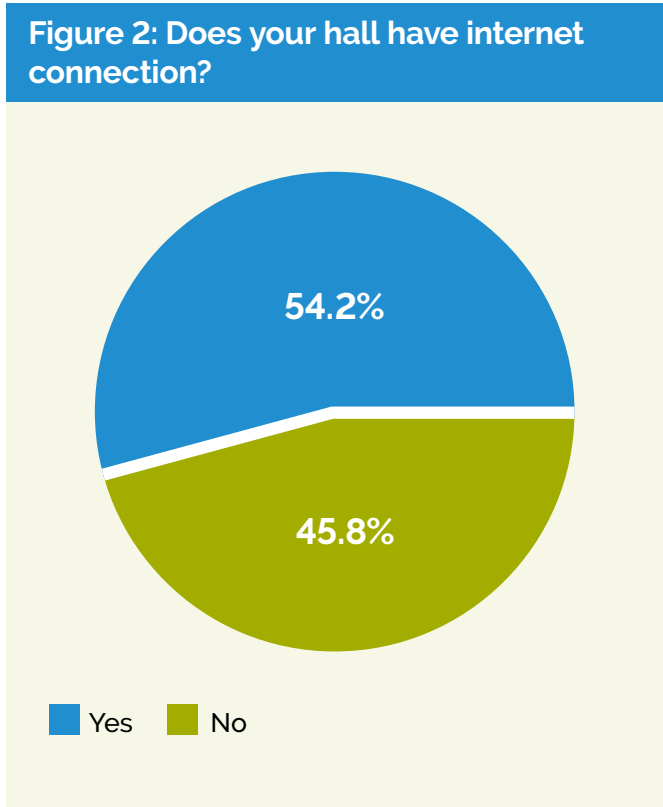
Fundraising events	Concerts	Weddings
Exercise classes	Community learning	Toddlers
Drama groups	Post Office	Community meetings
Dementia drop-in club	Lunch club	Craft groups
Dances	Quizzes	Parish Council
After school clubs	Brownies	Social coffee mornings
Book club	Film club	Women's Institute
Polling station	Choir	

Figure 1: Type of activities the village halls were used for pre-Covid



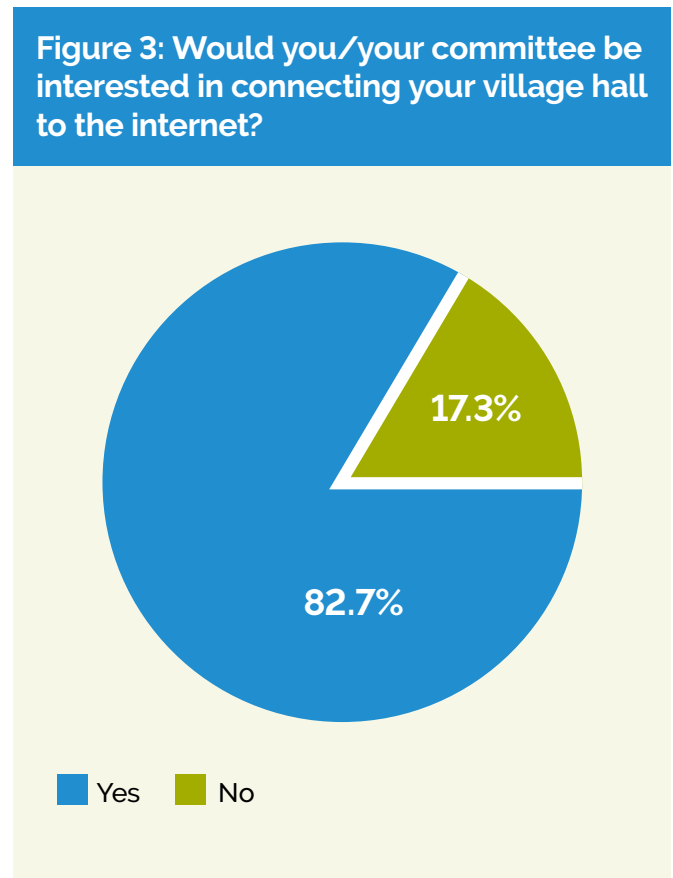
3. The survey

The total number of halls which did not have internet connection was 52 (54.2%). As can be seen below in figure two.



Reasons why they did not have internet varied, with just over half stating it was due to cost. Others included a lack of demand, no existing phone line in the halls and that the signal was too poor in the local area for a stable connection. The assertion that there is a lack of demand should be treated with caution as it is unclear how widely this was consulted on. This suggests that cost is the biggest factor preventing the halls from having internet access. There is an evident desire to have access in the halls, with 82.7% of the respondents stating that they would be interested in connecting their building to the internet, shown in figure three. Reasons for this were largely Covid-related, including that halls were looking to offer an alternative to working from home by providing workspaces to their users. Furthermore, there had been a realisation that due to Covid, internet connection could be a 'life enhancer' for their users. Additionally, there was an

acknowledgement that it could provide a useful asset in the future for the halls as it broadens the scope of what they can provide and how they can be used. Those who stated that their hall was not interested, thought there was a lack of demand from their users and that it would not be cost effective. Again, this highlights that village halls perceive cost as a significant barrier, saying it would not be too costly to put in an internet connection and finance the monthly payments for some halls.



The halls which do have an internet connection were broadly satisfied with the quality of the connection itself (79.5%), with the remaining stating that their connection was too slow or had poor/unreliable connection. Most of the halls are connected through broadband, and the main provider of the service is BT, followed by PlusNet. The main uses of the hall's internet were given as social, business, meetings, training, presentations, linking to the outside world

3. The survey

due to no phone signal in the local village, education and playing music. Small conferences and administration were also included, highlighting the breadth of activities which are undertaken with an internet connection. This further adds to the case for those halls who are looking to expand their potential usage for their members.

In terms of the actual devices which are used, 40% of halls reported that they did not have any. Approximately 45% had laptops and 20% had desktop computers, with 18% stating that individuals used the internet with their own devices. Out of those halls who have devices, only 34% stated that those devices are available to the local community.

The final few questions were asked to all halls who took part in the survey, whether they had an internet connection or not. The initial question in this section looked at

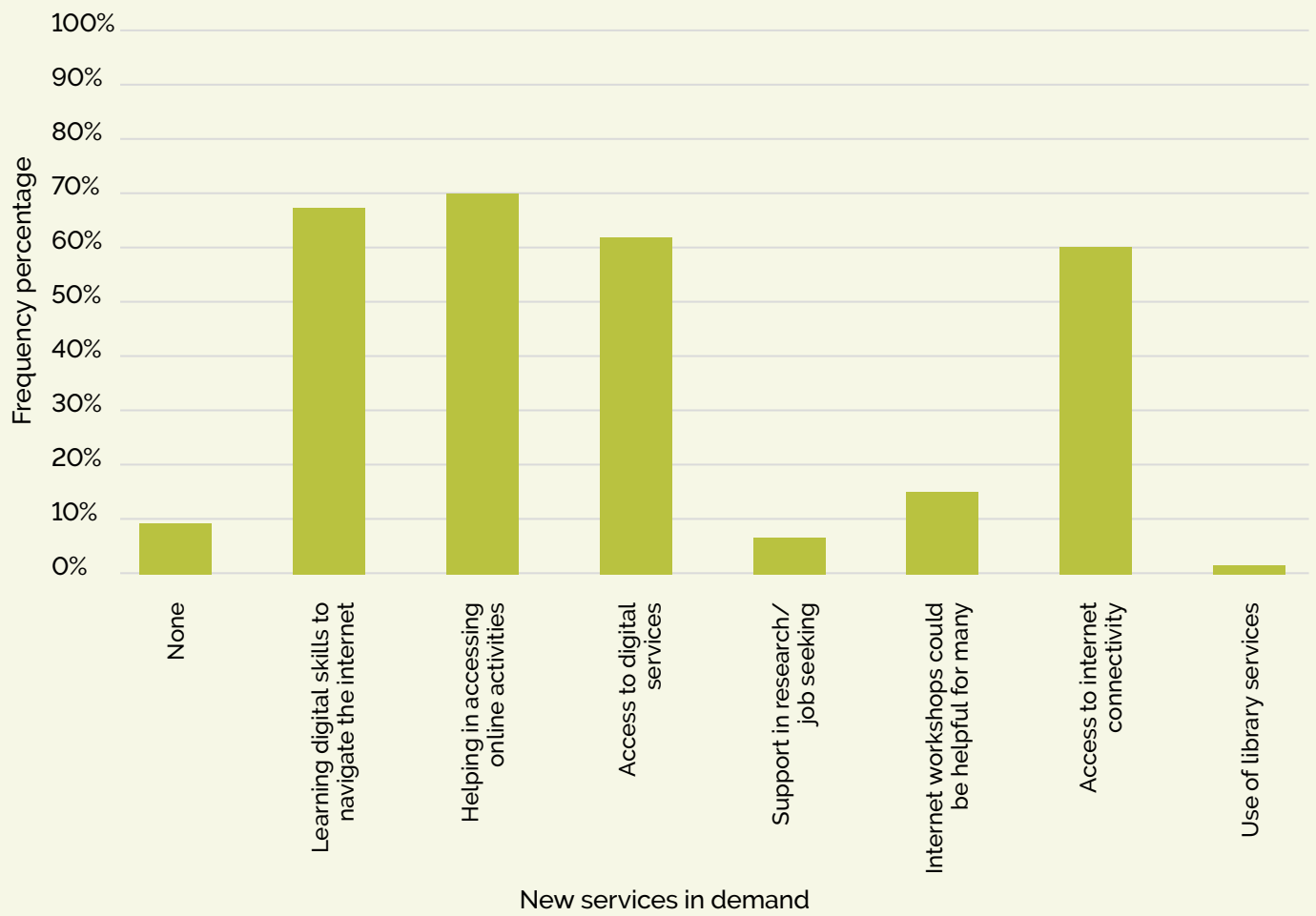
whether the respondent representing the hall thought there was an increased demand for a number of services, due to the spotlight Covid has shone on the need for internet connectivity and the subsequent digital skills required to use the internet safely. These services included 'helping to access online services' (70% of respondents selected this), 'learning digital skills to navigate the online world' (66%), 'access to digital services' (63%) and 'access to digital connectivity' (59%). Only 8% stating that there was 'no demand in the local community for any of the options'. This demonstrates the awareness that the halls have for the changed demand in their local areas for digital connection and training to be connected due to the changed reality brought about by the pandemic and how it affects everyday activities such as, socialising, working, and shopping.

Table 2: New digital services demand due to Covid-19

None.	Learning digital skills to navigate the internet.	Helping in accessing online activities.	Access to digital devices.
Use of library services.	Support in research/ job seeking. Access to Borrow Box with a Northumberland Library card. Access to free newspapers and magazines.	Internet workshops could be helpful for many older residents.	Access to internet connectivity.

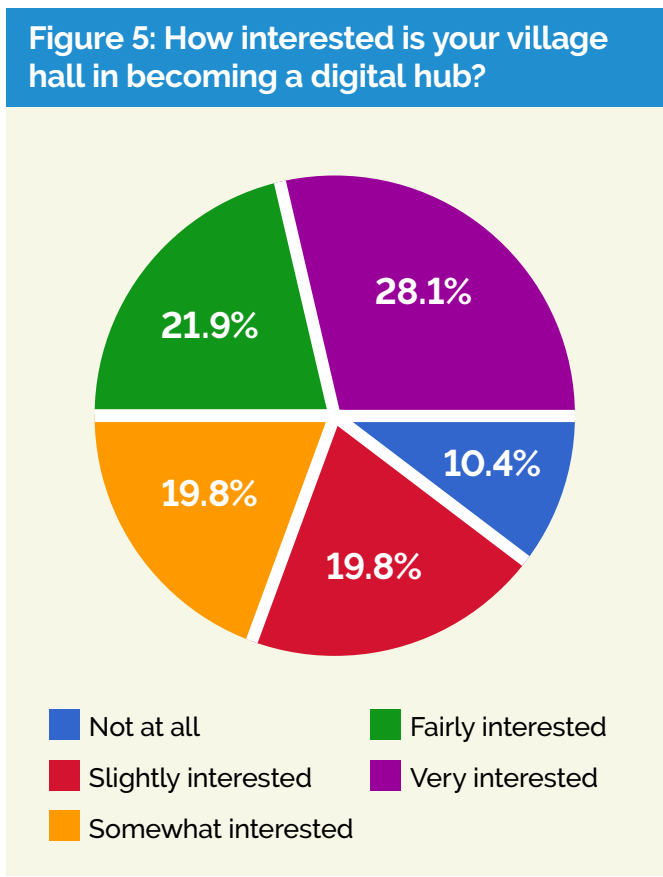
3. The survey

Figure 4: Bar chart of the new service which are in demand due to Covid



3. The survey

The penultimate questions examined if the halls were interested in becoming a digital hub, for instance providing one or all of the services which they had selected in the previous question. There was a mixed response, with exactly half of the halls selecting that they would either be 'very interested' or 'fairly interested' in becoming one. Only 10.4% stating that they would not be interested at all in becoming a digital hub, highlighted in figure five below:



The reasons for their answers included:

Hall's timetable already very busy

Basic lack of interest

Need to provide hall/committee with training to improve their digital skillset

Want to provide the community with more opportunities

Many of the community would like to improve their IT abilities

Young generation would like to see it, but village is mainly filled with elderly folk

3. The survey

Needing to provide hall volunteers/ committee with training to improve their digital skill set, basic lack of interest, younger generation would like to see it, but village is mainly filled with elderly folk. To achieve this the final question asked what additional resources the halls would need to fulfil this need to meet the demand, the answers included the following: Equipment, volunteers, training, internet connection that is low cost, well trained tutors, guidance, financial help.

To conclude the survey highlighted that many halls would like to broaden the services which they can provide to their members. The pandemic has highlighted the need for a stable internet connection in our daily lives.

Ensuring halls have an internet connection will allow them to provide increased services to their local community. However, for it to be sustainable, training is required to ensure all members who would like to use it can do so in a safe and confident manner. The survey highlights that halls perceive the main barrier to halls having digital connection is the cost. Possible ways of addressing these perceived barriers are considered in later sections of the report.

4. The case studies

The survey provides a broad understanding of the level to which village halls are connected, the perceived barriers, and their desires and aspirations to become more digitally connected. Six case studies were chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the role of the village hall in the community, how they see themselves as a digital hall, and the role of the hall in tackling issues of social exclusion, isolation and deprivation. This section combines findings from the survey and case studies. A broad geographical range of halls were chosen from those that are relatively well connected to market towns and urban centres, to more remote halls. Two halls with excellent connection were chosen, three have no connection and one had connection but it was not used very much. The case study halls were The Breamish Hall in Powburn, Matfen Village Hall, Lesbury Hall, Seahouses Hub, Humshaugh Hall, and Norham Public Hall. This section begins by looking at the role of the village hall in the community, then considers the 'digital hall', and finally reflects on the role village halls, and particularly digital village halls, play in tackling social isolation.

4.1 The village hall and the community

All of the trustees see their village halls as central to village life. As the survey details, the halls are busy with a variety of different activities, classes, groups, talks, and sometimes weddings, funerals and birthdays. In addition, some halls host large annual events that are important financial earners for the hall; the annual show (Breamish Hall); a fete and bonfire night (Matfen Village Hall) and a fair (Norham Public Hall).

“Powburn Show is a local annual event, it has sheep, horse jumping, stalls...we average about 2,000 on a good day.”

Breamish Hall

The halls reported that generally that the people in their community are older. Property is expensive and many have second homes with people retiring to the area. Humshaugh, Matfen and Norham have had some 'family' housing developments in their areas which are more affordable, but in general property in rural villages is expensive.

“In terms of age, I have a sense that we are mostly retired. To buy a house and live here is expensive, so housing for younger families was more difficult to afford.”

Norham Public Hall

In the main, the trustees of the halls pay peppercorn or no rent for their building. However, they are mostly responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the building, and given that many are designated or listed, the care of the building is expensive and requires considerable fund raising by the Trustees. For example, Humshaugh Village Hall is in a hall that was built in the 1920s as a memorial for WW1. It is very well built, and three years ago they began a ten-year refurbishment which is nearly complete. This included redecoration, improved flooring and a commercial kitchen. Lesbury Hall is in a conserved building and they have also fund-raised to maintain the hall.

4. The case studies

“We are responsible for the maintenance of the building. We have spent over £200,00 on the hall in the last four to five years.”

Lesbury Hall

The trustees have remarkable skills to fund-raise and write grant applications, including previously for EU funds, heritage grants, funds from Estate owners, lottery funding, private companies and other sources. Many have highlighted the invaluable support given by Louise Currie from CAN. The trustees are good community citizens, responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of one of the central community assets.

Where the trustees most serve their community is through trying to ensure the activities of the hall meet the needs of their village and community. The trustees had a good understanding of the needs and developed classes and activities to service the community. Matfen Village Hall has had families move into the area and are keen to develop a toddler group and a youth group. When the hall was allowed open during lockdown, they taught mindfulness and wellbeing month and ran yoga and pilates classes. There were many examples of village halls responding to the needs of the community.

Mindful of its elderly clientele, the Breamish Hall hosts the Warm Hub once a month for their older users. During Covid-19, the trustees organised and delivered sixty hampers to people who would normally have attended the Warm Hub.

“Statutory services are being cut all of the time and the hub plays an important role in community services. We have a book lending service because we no longer have a library. Our car park hosts the mobile library once a fortnight.”

Seahouses Hub

In summary, the trustees of village halls are resourceful, have considerable fund-raising and grant writing skills. They are motivated by a desire to integrate their village and community and strive to provide services and activities to serve their members. They are responsible for the maintenance of community assets and often consider how to develop these to increase income for the village hall to enable them to widen the activities they offer.

4. The case studies

4.2 The digital village hall

All of the halls, from digitally connected to unconnected, see digital connectivity as essential for the future of their activities. Matfen Village Hall trustees said 'it's the way things are going now with technology'.

"It's a whole new way forward. We will never go back to the way we were working and it will change the way people socialise."

Breamish Hall

There was a general consensus that the future will be different and it is a digital future. All of the halls discussed the opportunities that this raises for them and their community. They discussed using the Northumberland Village Halls Portal to market their services going forward. With good broadband connection, halls saw opportunities to market themselves for 'home working' from the village hall, showing films/ cinema evenings, hosting weddings, funerals, and birthdays. Other halls have realised how they can improve current activities with the internet. Norham Hall realised that the people trading at the Fair will want to use cashless machines, but this is impossible without digital connection. Other halls realise that art clubs, karate classes, and photography clubs all have greater potential if the halls are connected.

"We run a garden club and two or three times people have said I'll just show you a clip of...and they can't because we haven't got the facility. The photographic club bring a lot of their own photography into the hall and it is difficult for them to do workshops without access to the internet. So all kinds of things have just started to emerge."

Lesbury Hall

All the halls were aware that there is now a critical moment to encourage and train people to become digitally connected, while the shift to online services with Covid was still fresh in their memories. The hall trustees felt that the optimum time to offer training was as close to lockdown being lifted as possible: 'people will be thinking if I was more internet savvy I could have done a lot more things in Covid and kept in touch with people and that' (the Breamish Hall).

The trustees had ideas about how best to engage villagers in online training. The key message was to work around people's needs. As most of the communities are older, using Zoom and staying in touch with relatives and family came up frequently. The trustees of Seahouses Hub were keen to do informal training as opposed to 'formal' training in order to get a certificate. They felt that this is often a deterrent for people.

4. The case studies

“Unfortunately funding can be linked to someone getting a bit of paper. Then there is a lot of paperwork and the money is to pay somebody to come and do it. We can do it informally without the pressure to get a bit of paper. Where we need help is with the safety side of things.”

Seahouses Hub

All of the trustees of the halls were eager to access training and training support. There was a lot of interest and enthusiasm for the training of 'digital champions' that Northumberland Council can offer. There was particular eagerness for these digital champions not to be 'techies' or 'savvy' with devices, but rather to be people with a passion for digital, are self-taught and often 'accidental techies' who understand how to explain the basics rather than IT specialists. Trustees felt that these digital champions would be best placed to engage and teach people who were unsure and afraid.

“There are a lot of people in the village, older people, they need to have the confidence to try and come along and have a go.”

Breamish Hall

Others felt that the need is no longer so much for beginners as most people have mastered basic skills. Humshaugh trustees believe people are more interested in advancing their skills. They were keen to begin with a survey to establish what the villages training needs are.

“The market isn't for beginners any more, but for people who want more successful usage.”

Humshaugh Hall

The Breamish Hall trustees suggested that they could benefit on some training about what it is possible to do with digital inclusion. They believe that some of their community may have needs of which they are unaware, and some training or awareness raising would allow for more positive engagement with digital facilities. A number of trustees suggested having a second level support, a help desk, which they can contact when they have gone beyond or exhausted the skills of their volunteers.

All of the halls saw the Community Action Northumberland Village Halls Portal as having potential for training and support. They are keen for sharing of best practice, tips on resources and information about procedures to occur through the portal.

“I was on the Zoom a couple of days ago where CAN are setting up this portal. It is fantastic. I'm hoping that we can link to other village halls and pick up stuff from them and link to other initiatives.”

Matfen Village Hall

4. The case studies

Regardless of whether halls were digitally connected or not, all had fundraised or applied for grants to access equipment during Covid-19 because they realise it is critical to the way forward. Some halls discussed buying refurbished second-hand devices in the future and it was explained that while there might be funding to buy new devices, there is not any to buy second hand equipment.

For example, Matfen Village Hall got a grant from Northumberland County Council to help with IT equipment; Seahouses Hub got funding from Community Foundation Tyne and Wear to buy tablets and Humshaugh received lottery funding to buy three laptops, a printer and software. A number of halls were keen to have devices that they could loan, particularly to older people, for six weeks and train them how to use them. They felt that after this time they would buy their own devices and they were keen that they would buy the same device they were loaned as using the same device would make future training easier.

“The iPads are the ones that even get the technophobes involved. Most of our people can afford to buy their own. If we had some we could loan out for a month or six weeks, and show them how to use them, that that might encourage them to purchase their own.”

Lesbury Hall

All of the halls discussed the issue of the cost of getting the hall digitally connected and the ongoing connection fee. This is discussed in depth in Section five. Of relevance here is that the larger providers (BT/ EE) only have two rates, residential or business. There is no rate for charities and the village halls tend to be expected to take the more expensive business rate. Northumberland County Council negotiated with alternative providers, Alncom and FactCo, to connect village halls free of charge and to provide free connection when they win a contract in the area of the village hall. FactCo will connect village halls if they have a project in the area. Alncom have undertaken to connect all village halls in Northumberland and Durham free of charge and to provide connection free for one year. After that the halls can choose to go elsewhere, or if Alncom have won a contract in the area they will continue to provide it for free.

4. The case studies

4.3 Halls and social inclusion

The role that village halls play in building cohesive communities and assisting with social inclusion was abundantly clear in this research. Halls are reactive to the needs of the people in their community, and no one's need is too small to demand a response, as seen in the survey results where one hall provides a dementia drop-in club for one person. Of relevance here is the trustees' understanding of the need for this social inclusion role to have a digital dimension going forward.

The Breamish Hall provide facilities geared toward their older community. They have an exercise geared toward the over 50s and a 'Warm Hub' – a hot meal once a month. During Covid they were not able to host the Warm Hub, so they fundraised and with that funding one trustee told us: 'I did manage to do some hampers, 60 hampers and got them out. They were really quite pleased and surprised but the main thing they said was that it was lovely to actually see someone and actually talk to them. It was only 5-10 minutes on the doorstep, but that was the best part for them, seeing someone.' The trustees are acutely aware of the isolation that older people can experience in remote rural areas. They were very aware of the future role of digital knowledge to keep people connected.

“There is a need for connection and devices because people are lonely. We have a woman in her 90s getting on great because she has a daughter giving her exercises. Digital champions would really help us with this.”

Breamish Hall

Others could see potential for the halls to have a role digitally including people lacking the confidence to access further education. There was a view that if the halls had equipment then it might encourage people to participate in a safe environment.

“IT in the hall would allow people to access courses. Some people might not have the confidence to go into a college, but they might be more comfortable to do it in their local hall with people they know for support.”

Humshaugh Hall

There was evidence of halls with digital connection helping to combat hidden poverty in rural areas and assisting people in digital poverty. One hall was aware of local children who were in digital poverty and stepped in to help with home schooling:

4. The case studies

“There were local children... they had their laptops – they came to the hall two hours, three times a week and we had Engage 4 All come and work with them, all socially distanced.”

Breamish Hall

There was a heightened awareness of the need for older people to be digitally included. Halls were aware of the need for older people to have devices, skills and confidence to enable them to be connected. A particular theme was the opportunity to connect with friends and family through Facebook, Snapchat, Zoom and other digital platforms. Trustees have been busy during the lockdown to raise funds to ensure their older communities can stay connected. They were also very aware of the need for safety training around digital usage.

“Not everyone has a computer, particularly the elderly residents, and not everyone wants a computer. I’ve recently got funding to buy some tablets to teach people how to use them. It is so important to stay connected.”

Seahouses Hall

Other halls were aware of the need to connect the younger members of their community. Matfen Village Hall is keen to have toddler groups and a youth club. They also saw future internet connection as allowing them to do more to ensure inclusion

of young people. They have fundraised and bought a projector and a screen and they are keen to start showing films and have cinema evenings.

“It opens up all sorts of opportunities for children – you can have a birthday party in the hall and show a film..”

Matfen Village Hall

Halls also had ideas about the roles that they could play to foster inclusive communities as society changes. They discussed how the increase in secular society may bring the hall more central to the community and in order to fulfil this role digital connection will be critical.

“We have an up to date kitchen and we were starting to get some interest in wedding receptions. It would be good to be connected and able to advertise ourselves on the portal.”

Lesbury Village Hall

4. The case studies

Other halls also saw an increasing role for halls in the provision of civil ceremonies.

“If you don’t want a church funeral it is often difficult to get a venue for a humanist funeral and I feel quite privileged that someone wanted to use the hall for a humanist funeral. Again, the internet is really important here because you can stream music and people far away can attend virtually.”

Norham Public Hall

Villages and communities are always battling with the loss of public and private services, given low population density and remoteness which can mean the provision of services is not always viable. Communities take the loss of facilities hard, and often fear that it will lead to reduced community interaction and a loss of community cohesion. Halls see an important role for themselves here if they are digitally connected. Seahouses have already compensated for the loss of their library and Norham have ideas about how to compensate for the loss of their post office.

“We don’t have a post office any longer. But now you can do online postage, weigh and print your postage, and the hall would be a great place for people to come and sort their own postage if we were digitally connected. We could also offer click and collect because we are right in the middle of the village.”

Norham Public Hall

As well as the additional activities they could undertake to enhance social inclusion, the halls were also aware of the current activities they could do better. They talked about Zoom allowing less mobile people in the community to continue participating in book clubs, the increased success of shows and fairs with cashless payments, and the additional resources that would be available to photography, art and gardening clubs, to mention just a few.

5. Connecting two halls

5.1 Their needs

The two halls identified here are Norham and Lesbury.

Norham

Norham is a village and civil parish in Northumberland. It is located 7 miles (11 km) south-west of Berwick on the south side of the River Tweed where it is the border with Scotland with a population of around 700 people.

The village hall is over 120 years old which can accommodate up to 180 users. It has a stage, a kitchen, a committee room, a snooker room and has a toilet adapted for people with disabilities.

Pre Covid the hall was used daily, usually just by a single group. Activities included table tennis, Scottish country dancing, pilates, yoga, exercise class and a history society.

Norham currently has no digital connection and this is seen as a major barrier to their future plans but are committed to introducing this as a priority.

Future plans include a film society, pantomime, art club, reading group and developing the hall for parties and celebrations. Other ideas include hiring the venue for weddings, funerals and enabling people to connect with family through Zoom calls.

They have been looking at possible refurbishment options to make the hall more attractive such as improving the heating system, which currently works on a metered basis. There is currently no designated parking for the hall which is also a drawback as visitors have to use any available on street parking.

They would like to introduce some classes for people who lack the skills and confidence to use digital services. Another big issue is to provide a facility for vendors at fairs to be

able to take cashless payments. There is also a desire to be able to show films or sports events through live streaming which it is felt could potentially increase income.

They have also discussed the possibility of offering the hall as a venue for events like company away days but are aware they would need to be connected to facilitate this.

Another idea was around the provision of an online postal service. The village no longer has a post office but is served twice weekly by a mobile Royal Mail van. This has not always proved to be reliable and the idea is that the hall be used as a possible click and collect facility.

A further benefit would be to help elderly people to access online shopping which was felt would provide a much-needed service.

The interviewees from Norham are extremely passionate about the possibilities that will open up if they are connected and are committed to ensuring it is implemented successfully.

They believe this would help with attracting new users as well as enhancing the experience of current groups.

Previous committees felt that it was an unnecessary spend of money but this has changed and the pandemic has highlighted that there is a real need.

Alncom have previously surveyed the building but could not provide a wireless connection as there was no signal. However, they have now stated that they can connect via a FTTC connection free of charge and with free usage.

There is a strong feeling that there would be interest in taking up training opportunities, with the Covid pandemic again being cited as a driver for this.

5. Connecting two halls

Lesbury

Lesbury is a small rural village in Northumberland. It is built on the main coastal road 3.5 miles (5.6 km) southeast of Alnwick, on the north bank of the River Aln. Alnmouth railway station is about half a mile away. There are around 500 households in the parish.

The village hall dates back to the 1850 and currently pays rent of around £1,000 per year, which is substantially higher than most other halls surveyed. The hall is a Grade 2 listed building.

The committee have spent over £200,000 on maintenance and refurbishment over the last five years raised through grants from the lottery, English Heritage and Sport England among others.

This has provided the hall with an up-to-date heating system and an industrial kitchen facility.

Pre Covid the hall was used by a variety of groups on a daily basis and for parties and events most weekends.

Activities include table tennis, photography club, art group, bridge, bowls, a community choir, dance/ fitness, film nights, pilates, gardening and a toddlers' group.

The committee at Lesbury Village Hall have done a considerable amount of preliminary research into e potentially becoming a digital hub, including costing equipment.

They were digitally connected until about four years ago when it was decided it was not proving to be cost effective as it was not widely used. There is a realisation now that there is a strong need for it among current and prospective users, with a particular desire to introduce the capacity to host events using a facility such as Zoom. They are confident they have the capacity to train users in basic digital skills.

They currently maintain a non-interactive website detailing activities and events and bookings can be made via e-mail.

They have previously helped older residents to access facilities such as Zoom and are extremely keen to develop this from the hall as the connection in the area generally is not good.

They also believe they can enhance current activities by for example engaging speakers for events who ordinarily would not travel to the hall. They are also keen to be able to have film nights and currently have a public licence to show DVDs. Another idea is to link up with other village halls to have guest speakers or events through tools such as Zoom. In addition to this the Parish Council is also keen to be able stream meetings held in the hall.

It is strongly felt the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the necessity to be connected digitally and that the introduction of broadband would be a tremendous asset for the community.

5.2 The options

We were asked to look at four providers to ascertain approximate costs for connection and monthly usage.

As previously stated, the larger suppliers such as BT and EE do not have any concessionary rates for charitable organisations and therefore would connect halls on a business rate footing.

EE quote a connection fee of £50 and then a monthly tariff of around £30. This would also depend on signing up to an 18-month contract.

BT also quote similar costs but packages depend on signing up for two years.

Both halls were wary of tying themselves to a long-term contract until they are certain of the volume of usage and service they will receive.

5. Connecting two halls

They have both been offered free connection by Alncom but were uncertain as to what kind of contract this committed them to. Whilst FACTO are keen to offer free service to village halls they can only do it in areas where they have a presence which do not include Lesbury or Norham at this time.

Alncom have offered to install free connection and free usage with no obligation to tie in to a time specific contract.

5.3 Available support

We spoke with Simon Mills of Northumberland Learning Skills Service who has previously worked with halls to deliver BCS EDSQ (Essential Digital Skills Qualification) training.

This would depend on them having connectivity and a sufficient amount of interest. Simon has also suggested that it could be possible to link a few halls together whilst delivering the training.

The qualifications are aimed at two levels:

- Entry level - qualifications designed for adults with no or little prior experience of using digital devices or the internet.
- Level 1 - qualifications designed for adults with some experience of using digital devices and the internet but lacking secure basic digital skills.

BCS have used the National Standards for Essential Digital Skills (developed by the Department for Education) to create the qualifications.

The BCS qualifications cover all five skills areas set out in the national standards. These are:

1. Using devices and handling information.
2. Creating and editing.
3. Communicating.
4. Transactions.
5. Being safe and responsible online.

The Good Things Foundation is a charity which supports digitally and socially excluded people to improve their lives through digital. (See appendix 8.1)

www.onlinecentresnetwork.org

Further support and advice can be obtained from:

ACRE (Action with communities in Rural England)

www.acre.org.uk

CAN (Community Action Northumberland)

www.ca-north.org.uk

BT Skills for tomorrow

<https://www.bt.com/skillsfortomorrow>

Barclays Digital Eagles

<https://www.barclays.co.uk/digital-confidence/eagles>

Northumberland Learning and Skills team offer residents a wide variety of full and part time courses for 16-18 year olds and adults; apprenticeships; career's guidance and employability advice and support.

<https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Education/Learning.aspx>

Available funding sources

There is generally no one source of funding. An organisation such as Good Things Foundation regularly provides updates on the latest available funding.

Generally applications can be made through different routes:

- Digital skills training for local communities
- Equipment/resources for local venues
- Benefits to specific socially excluded groups (e.g. unemployed, older people, NEETs)

Potential funders include:

The National Lottery Community Fund

Northumberland County Council Community Chest Fund

JobCentre Plus

Parish Councils

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Post Covid-19 it is not simply that digital connection is essential, **digital connection must be seen as a human right**. Policy and political commitment can ensure that all communities are digitally connected, including rural ones. Many people now rely on digital access to bank, grocery shop, pay bills and to access government and healthcare services. Rural Cornwall are an example of how an overarching commitment, working with rural village halls, can ensure remote rural communities are connected: rural Cornwall is the most digitally connected region in Europe.

Halls have a central role to play in the digital future of rural communities. They have the capacity and the will to become the digital heart of villages. Halls are flexible with their opening hours, they are low-cost charging little for usage, and they are very inclusive. They are sensitive to the needs of their community and able to cater for very low numbers which other initiatives might consider too low for financial viability. This is evident in a hall running a dementia drop-in club for one person, and another hall working with Engage 4 All and using their digital connection to help three children without access to data to home school during Covid-19.

The data from the survey and case studies is very rich. Below, we have tried to distil the findings into workable recommendations for the future.

Connection:

- One key issue for halls is the cost of installation and ongoing costs. The survey reported it as the single biggest barrier. Alternative broadband providers Alncom and FactCo, both of whom are committed to working to connect rural areas, have undertaken where possible to provide installation and connection free of charge. This is very welcome. It is **RECOMMENDED** that larger providers offer a charity rate. At present the only options are residential or business, with many halls charged a business rate.
- Trustees of halls have worked hard during Covid to fundraise for devices to help train villagers, particularly older members of the community. It is **RECOMMENDED** that public funds are made available to assist village halls to access devices, and a plan is worked out with halls to ensure the same devices are purchased across halls to help ease future training.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Connecting the community:

- It is **RECOMMENDED** that halls pursue the strategy intended by some, of lending devices to people in the village for a maximum of six weeks, providing training, and then asking for their return. Lending of devices might in some cases need to include a data sim for those people who don't have an internet connection in their own home.
- It is **RECOMMENDED** that Northumberland County Council's Learning and Skills team continue to work closely with the halls to identify and meet their needs.
- It is **RECOMMENDED** that the programme of digital champions be rolled out for the halls. It is **RECOMMENDED** that the champions include villagers who are enthusiastic about digital connection.
- It is **RECOMMENDED** that the idea of a 'help desk' that halls can approach once they have exhausted the skills of their champions is given consideration.
- It is **RECOMMENDED** that the best practice identified by halls is followed in any training provided; beginning with people's needs and breaking training into segments; email training on Mondays, Zoom training on Tuesdays, shopping on Wednesdays and so on.
- It is further **RECOMMENDED** that the knowledge of the halls around how to make training more attractive is utilised; for example, the Breamish Hall suggested providing training before or after the meal provided by the Warm Hub to encourage attendance.
- It is **RECOMMENDED** that training on staying safe online around internet usage is prioritised. This was a concern for all the halls.
- It is **RECOMMENDED** that Community Action Northumberland build on the Village Hall Portal to organise training sessions and exchange best practice. The halls were very keen for this to happen in the future and saw it as a safe learning space.

Social inclusion and the village halls:

- It is **RECOMMENDED** that the role of the hall in tackling hidden rural poverty is recognised and resourced.
- The lack of skills and qualifications in rural areas is a policy concern. It is **RECOMMENDED** that the role of halls in providing a safe and supportive learning environment is recognised and resourced.

Improving and diversifying the role of village halls:

- It is **RECOMMENDED** that some awareness raising is undertaken with halls to explain the many ways IT can enhance the activities hall already undertake to enhance provisions, for example, with photography clubs, gardening clubs, and so on.
- It is **RECOMMENDED** that halls are supported and resourced to increase provisions as services are cut and reduced in rural areas, such as rural cinemas, and post offices.
- It is **RECOMMENDED** that halls are supported to provide new and emerging activities such as funerals and weddings, which are more inclusive with digital connection.

7. Appendices

7.1 Good Things Foundation how to become a hub

Good Things Foundation

The Good Things Foundation is a charity which supports digitally and socially excluded people to improve their lives through digital.

www.goodthingsfoundation.org

www.onlinecentresnetwork.org

There are thousands of Online Centres around the UK, covering the most deprived areas of the country. Centres range from libraries to community centres, learning services to GP practices, and churches to social housing providers.

Benefits of joining the network

There are a number of benefits to joining the Online Centres Network:

- A dedicated Network Specialist who will support and help you with all elements of your membership.
- Access to the free online platform, Learn My Way, helping your learners to gain digital skills and confidence.
- Networking and face to face collaboration events, giving you opportunities to share with similar organisations. You can also be part of the network Facebook group, where you can share with and learn from other partners.
- Training opportunities - based on the feedback you provide about your particular support needs, there is a rolling programme of webinars and training events to upskill you and your staff.
- Relevant, regular communications about training, events, funding opportunities, good practice and success stories.
- Participation in local and national digital and social inclusion campaigns and projects, with marketing support to help you to succeed and to have a positive impact.

- Advocacy with a national voice. We are mission led and focused on changing lives and using our collective impact to influence change at a national level.
- Access to funding opportunities and grants, secured from partners and rolled out to the Online Centres Network.
- The opportunity for your organisation to be featured within the national search database, so potential learners can find you. It also helps you to promote your involvement with Good Things Foundation and the national movement.
- Bespoke data management tools, to help you to track your learners' progress, and giving you evidence of your organisation's real impact and success.
- Access to a bank of resources to help you to support people remotely, ranging from how to help others to use digital messaging services, through to organising a successful online event.
- A 'buddying' service - if you want to be put in touch with likeminded members, or others with specific specialisms, just let Good Things Foundation know and they will provide this as part of your membership benefits

What is needed from you

- To know what challenges you face and what outcomes you are focused on.
- That you help at least 3 people per month to improve either their digital skills, employability, and/or health and wellbeing, helping them to become confident, and to progress to further learning if relevant.
- That you complete the quarterly Membership Survey, which will also provide a summary of the progress and achievements of the people you are supporting.
- To share your good news stories, and how being a member of Good Things Foundation has helped your organisation and the people you support.

7. Appendices

7.2 How to have a cinema

An increasing number of halls have expressed a wish to host movie nights for the local community. There are some things you should be aware of when organising such events to ensure you are in compliance with relevant regulations.

You cannot simply show a DVD or download a film at your hall as under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, copyrighted home videos and DVDs are intended for home use only. The correct 'public performance' licence is needed.

You will need a 'non-theatrical' film licence to show films and TV programmes in public (but not in a cinema), for example:

DVD, Film and Video: The public performance of DVD, Film and Video requires a licence from the film distributor. You can choose between a public or private showing – the rules are quite different. See <https://www.gov.uk/showing-films-in-public> for guidance.

Public film show: The film is advertised and shown to the general public who pay for admission. A licence is needed: contact www.filmbank.co.uk. For regular showings, there is a tariff related to box office takings and size of venue.

Private film club: The film is advertised and shown only to a film club - strictly 'members only' who are NOT charged admission to the film. The costs of running the club are met by annual subscription. A public video screening licence is required: contact www.filmbankmedia.com/pvsl or www.themplc.co.uk/

Showing films is 'regulated entertainment' so keep within your Premises Licence or 'de-regulated' conditions set out above.

If you plan to charge for tickets to your screening to generate a profit, you will need

to check your chosen venue has a premises licence to exhibit films as stipulated by the Licensing Act 2003.

If you are charging for tickets but only to cover your costs, and assuming your screening is to be held between 8.00am and 11.00pm, your venue does not need a premises licence. The Licensing Act 2003 defines screenings of this type as not-for-profit.

You can charge for additional activities (such as refreshments or film talks) with a view to making a profit, as long as these are kept distinct from admission to the film itself.

If you are screening to generate a profit, you need to check your chosen venue has a premises licence in place. Please note that this extends even to screenings where you are selling tickets to raise funds for charity.

For more information visit www.ncl.ac.uk/cre or www.ca-north.org.uk

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