







The role of community buildings

A survey by Paul Marriott for Community Matters establishes that there are at least 18,800 community buildings across England and Wales, used by about 4.4 million people every week. Nearly a quarter of a million volunteers serve on their management committees. The research also found that:

-  Many community buildings run with little or no outside subsidy, but 40 per cent of survey respondents felt that funding is becoming increasingly difficult.
-  Community buildings are host to a wide variety of activities catering for all sections of the community from the very young to the very old. Often they are the only community facility in a neighbourhood, available for public use.
-  Although there are differences between buildings, in terms of age, size and location, the issues and difficulties their management committees face - such as the comparative invisibility to both local communities and policy-makers - are to a great degree shared.
-  The volunteers who manage community buildings relate to their communities in a number of different ways, and these differences affect the role particular buildings play and the way they are managed.
-  Many volunteers who run community buildings believe that the building is working to capacity.
-  The researcher concludes that community buildings can and do play a key role in strengthening local communities. However, they need more resources, and better access to specialist information and advice, if they are to expand and develop their activities to meet changing needs.

Community buildings

For the purpose of this project, a 'community building' means a building which is managed by a voluntary management committee, run for public benefit, and plays host to a range of activities for a range of users. It therefore includes most village and community halls and community centres (apart from those managed directly by local authorities), church halls and other faith-based buildings open to the wider community, some buildings attached to schools, and others catering for a specific community of interest.

The project identified 18,809 community buildings in England and Wales. This is the fullest listing anywhere of community buildings (although it is still not comprehensive). More than a third are village halls, a quarter are community centres and one in twelve are church buildings. About one quarter are buildings which cannot be specifically classified from the information available.

From a sample survey conducted for the project, it can also be estimated that 4.4 million people - equivalent to almost 10 per cent of the total population of England and Wales - use community buildings every week. About 235,000 people are involved in their management as committee members or trustees. (This figure does not include all the other volunteers who run activities within the buildings.)

Funding and finance

Between them, the buildings have an estimated annual turnover of nearly £250 million. Based on the survey, the average turnover for a community building is £14,000.

Nearly all community buildings raise a significant part of their income from rents and hirings. Many of them are self-sustaining as far as their day-to-day running costs are concerned, and this gives them a highly developed sense of autonomy.

The survey found that 31 per cent got some money from local authority grants and 22 per cent received funding from parish council grants. Less than 2 per cent mentioned a decrease in local authority funding as a major change in the previous three years.

However, the picture which emerges from the survey is that, for many community buildings, finding the running costs of the building has always been, and continues to be a struggle. Funding came top of the list of major difficulties faced by respondents to the survey. Only a few (10 per cent) felt that this struggle is becoming any easier. Nearly 40 per cent considered that it is getting more difficult. Any major change, such as the introduction of a market rent by a local authority landlord or a major expense to comply with new legislative standards, would clearly present an even greater challenge to many committees.

Maintaining the building

The survey found that 63 per cent of community buildings are more than 40 years old. This will obviously have an impact both on operating costs and maintenance costs. Of the 41 per cent of respondents who said that major changes or developments were planned for the next three years, the vast majority referred to improvements to the building or its facilities, rather than its programme of activities.

Classifying community buildings

The research suggests that classification according to location (rural/urban/inner city), the age and size of the building, the level of turnover, and whether staff are employed is more useful than the traditional classification into community centre, village hall etc.

The project also identified four main types of buildings, according to the way the volunteers who manage community buildings relate to their local community. These are:

'Symbol' - where the primary motivation of the managers is to hold the building on trust;

'Resource' - where the primary motivation of the managers is to maintain the building as a resource for local groups and activities;

'Gathering place' - where the managers take on the additional role of arranging events within the building for the whole community;

'Cultivator' - where the managers look beyond the building and are motivated by a desire to see the growth and development of their local community.

These different roles clearly have implications for the way that the building is managed and the role that the building can be expected to play in the strengthening and development of its local community.

Notwithstanding these differences, the picture which emerges is that there is a high degree of commonality between community buildings. The difficulties which face them, the environment they function within, the activities which take place within them are, to a great degree, shared.

Community involvement and accountability

Community buildings play a major role in strengthening their local community, often providing the only public place where a range of local people can associate with their neighbours. Moreover, the potential for people to become involved in the management and running of their local community

building can lead to a greater sense of pride in and responsibility for their local community.

They are managed by people with real commitment, many of whom bring years of experience to the task. Nearly half of the respondents to the survey had been involved with their community building for more than 10 years. They see themselves as highly accountable to their local community and seek to make their building accessible to the local community - both physically (for example, by ensuring good access for people with disabilities) and practically (for example, by offering subsidised hirings to new groups).

However, the survey found that many have a poorly developed sense of the changing needs of their local community, and the market for what they have to offer. They are often much more concerned with the physical management of the building than with the development of the local community and the role the building has to play within such development.

Role of paid staff

The survey found that paid employees were working within 65 per cent of community buildings. However, many of these employed only a cleaner and/or caretaker. This was particularly true for village halls, of which only 2 per cent employed a hall manager and only 7 per cent a co-ordinator or bookings secretary.

Many community buildings, therefore, rely on voluntary effort to take responsibility not only for the management of the building, but also its day-to-day running. Moreover, the evidence of the ten case studies carried out for the project suggests that, if anything, this reliance on volunteers has increased in recent years. At the same time, of the buildings included in the case studies, those which had one or more paid staff clearly benefited, in the opinion of the researcher and the stakeholders in the building, from this resource.

Training and skills development

The project found that many of the people involved in managing and running community buildings needed help to develop their skills in four key areas:

- strategic planning (including identifying community needs, market research and marketing and communication);
- volunteer recruitment;
- delegation, or the sharing of responsibility;
- resolving conflict.

Conclusion

There is no blueprint or one right structure for managing a community building. However, the project identified a number of factors which are

critical to the success of a community building:

The fabric of the building needs to be attractive, flexible enough to encourage a variety of uses and in a good state of repair.

The group responsible for managing the community building needs to *have a vision*, a sense of why they are there and what they want to achieve.

Such a group needs good, respected *leadership* - either an individual or a small group - able to make a long-term commitment to the success of the building.

The *local community* needs to have a stake in the building. Ideally, they should have a role in deciding what kind of community building they have, they should feel able to participate in the management of the building and they should have a very real sense that it is 'their' building.

A *supportive climate* is of inestimable value. Secure and stable tenure, a legislative and regulatory framework which is conducive to good management and allies at local and national level who appreciate the value of community buildings and the work they do can do much to help.

Access to quality, practical, relevant support from a local development agency or a local authority or relevant national body, particularly providing help with planning and trouble-shooting, can be vital to the success of a building.

There needs to be a *balance of activities* between commercial hirings and, where necessary, subsidised community use.

Paid staff can make a positive difference.

About the study

Community Matters commissioned an independent researcher, Paul Marriott, to undertake the study between October 1995 and October 1996. The first phase mapped community buildings in England and Wales. The main sources used were the ratings list of non-domestic properties, and information on buildings in their area provided by some local authorities, councils for voluntary service and rural community councils.

The second phase involved a telephone survey of a representative sample of the total database of 18,809 buildings. Twenty-minute telephone interviews were carried out by a firm of market researchers, Wood Holmes of Newcastle upon Tyne, with nominated representatives of the management committees of 916 buildings.

The third phase consisted of ten case studies of a representative cross-section of buildings selected from the telephone respondents. The case studies were used

to pursue in greater depth some of the issues emerging from the survey.

Further information

If you want further information about this project or wish to access the Community Buildings Database, please contact Charles Woodd, National Director, Community Matters, 8/9 Upper Street, London N1 0PQ. Tel: 0171 226 0189. Copies of the full reports *Forgotten Resources? The role of community buildings in strengthening local communities* by Paul Marriott for Community Matters, are available from York Publishing Services Ltd, (Price £9.95 plus £1.50 p&p, ISBN 1 899987 51 7).

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- 204 Achieving regeneration through combining employment training and physical improvement (Mar 97)
- 216 The potential contribution of 'Resident Services Organisations' (Jun 97)

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