

# Digital Opportunities for ACRE's Village Halls Advice and Information Service

Project report June 2022

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank colleagues in the ACRE Network who took time out of their busy schedules to engage with this project, share their views and contribute to the information summarised in this project report. We are also grateful to the National Lottery Communities Fund who sponsored this work, as well as specialist input from SIDE labs.



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## Summary

This report summarises a project undertaken by ACRE between 2021/22 which reviewed how digital solutions could be deployed for the improvement of the Village Halls Advice and Information Service offered to voluntary committees who manage rural community buildings across England.

Evidence is drawn from engagement with ACRE Network practitioners who were canvassed about their experiences and views of the service during two workshops held in the autumn of 2021 and a survey of village hall advisers in March 2022. Their insight has been used to identify areas of the service that could benefit from development by utilising digital applications.

### Key findings

There are opportunities to develop the Village Halls Advice and Information Service with respect to improving the experience for end users, making this a more consistent offer to village halls across England, and adopting more efficient approaches to its delivery.

Whilst there are many strengths to the service, feedback from ACRE Network practitioners revealed several ‘pinch points’ relating to the delivery of the support to village hall committees, namely:

- Some halls do not engage with the advice and support on offer, with take-up varying geographically. Not all end users find it easy to engage with services provided online although digital solutions offered during the pandemic has increased participation in some respects
- There is no consistent approach to capturing information about service users nationally, keeping this up to date or learning from the data. This can hinder the relationships between ACRE members and halls which is key to successful delivery
- ACRE members have limited capacity and resources to field enquiries. Since the pandemic, an increasing number of enquiries have been made to ACRE nationally; however most have been redirected to members locally
- Technical information provided by ACRE is essential to advisers’ support of halls locally, but there is a view that access to these resources could be improved, along with their presentation for end users

### Recommendations

Working with specialist input from SIDE labs, we identified several digital solutions which could be developed to improve service delivery for all concerned. Recommendations include:

1. Developing standardised digital processes for receiving and triaging initial enquiries
2. Implementing a CRM to better record and manage relationships with village halls
3. Improving the presentation of information and resources for halls by making content more accessible and engaging online



These solutions have the potential to integrate with and complement each other. Their development should be further investigated and discussed with ACRE members as they may necessitate changes to the business model underpinning delivery of the service and will need significant coordination and resource nationally.



## What our members told us

This section provides a summary of feedback received from network colleagues canvassed over the duration of the project, including 12 attendees at two workshops held in September 2021 and 37 responses to an online survey circulated to village hall advisers in March 2022.

### Workshop feedback

We began our engagement with network colleagues by convening a group of senior managers and village hall advisers online to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the village halls service. Their comments were noted on an online whiteboard which is shown in **Figures 1 & 2**.

Perceived strengths can be loosely categorised as follows:

- The service is unique and there is no comparable support for village halls provided elsewhere
- There is an experienced network of advisers nationally who are used to working together to offer specialist support to village halls
- The pandemic demonstrated the possibility of delivering services online, which can increase uptake and participation
- There may be opportunities to develop the service for the improvement of end-users through solutions that are more geographically joined up or involve working with external organisations to lever in expertise

Weaknesses included:

- There was a concern that village halls don't always engage or know about the support on offer
- Some members lack capacity to field enquiries and often a disproportionate amount of time is spent responding to immediate issues faced by halls rather offering more proactive support and training
- Some village hall committees find it difficult to engage with services provided online
- The services provided by members of the network varies across the country and ACRE isn't currently well equipped to field enquiries from groups nationally



Figure 1: screenshot showing comments about the strengths of the village halls service

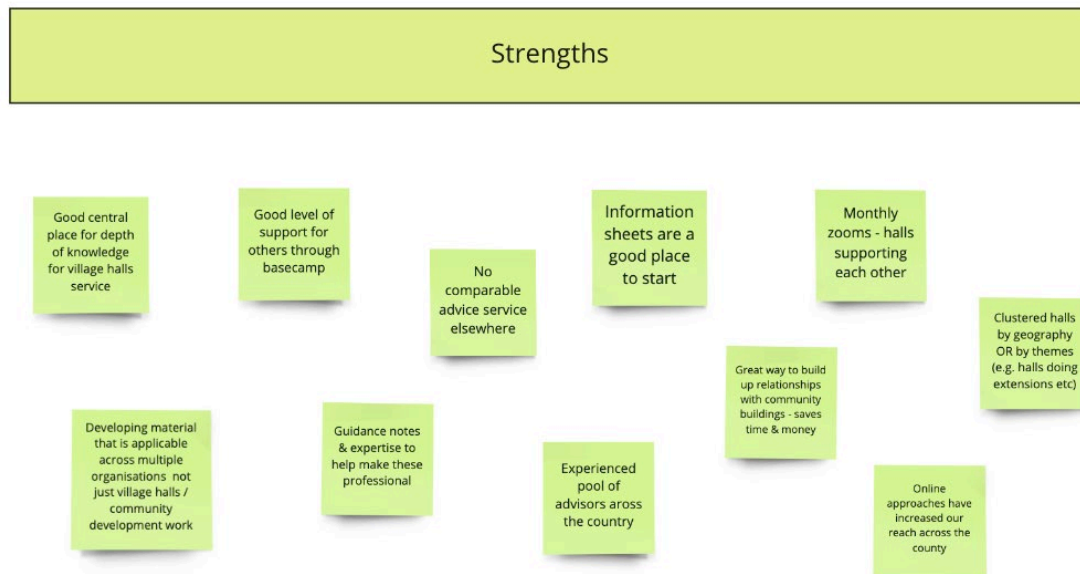


Figure 2: screenshot showing comments about the weaknesses of the village halls service

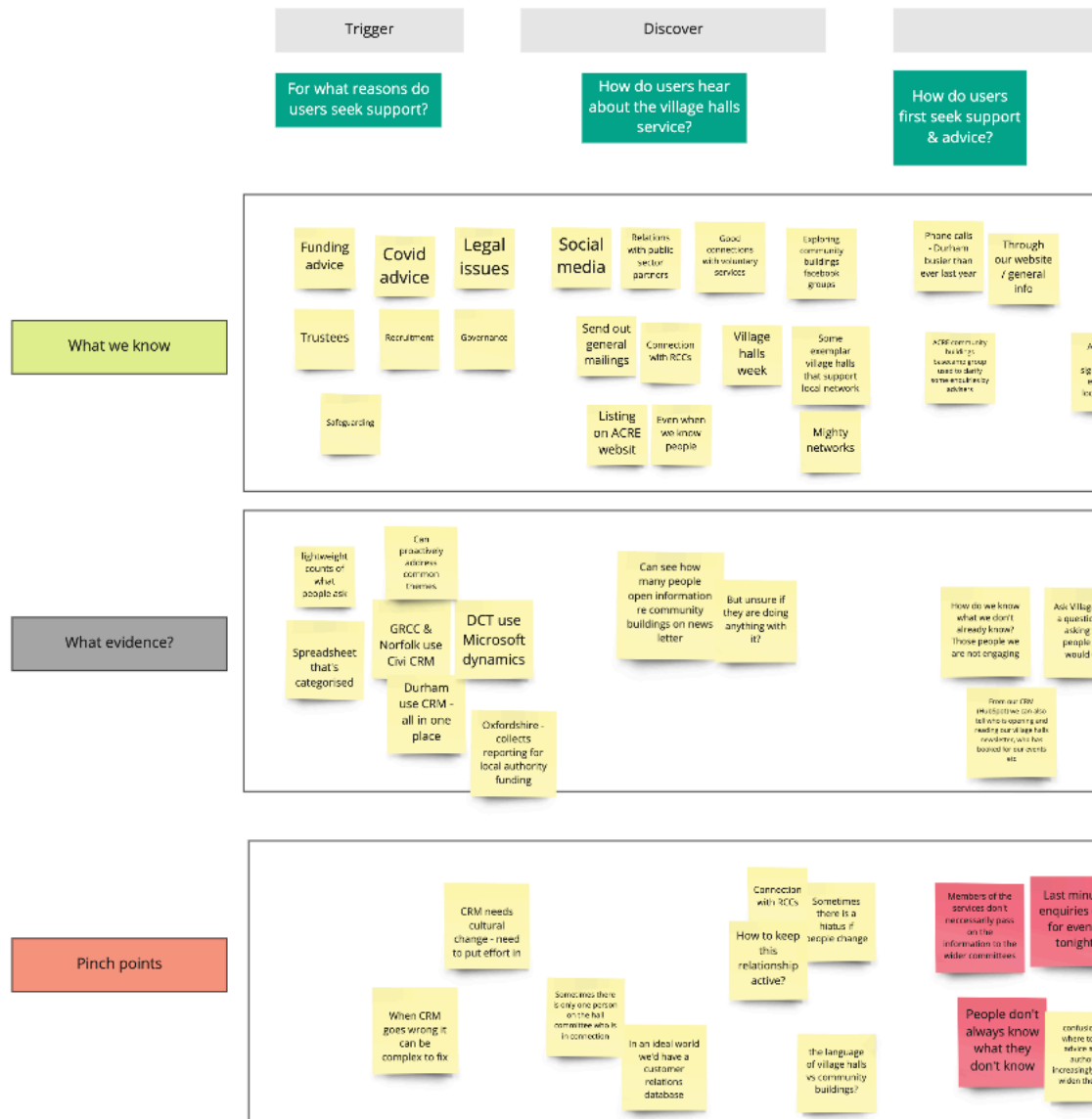


To provide a more nuanced understanding of how some of these strengths and weaknesses play out in practice, we also engaged workshop participants in an exercise which mapped out their understanding of the service user's journey, starting with the needs that prompt village hall management committees to seek support, and moving on to how they receive advice and support.



**Figure 3** shows how we captured feedback from participants during the user journey mapping exercise. This included initial thoughts on each stage, consideration of the evidence that exists to back this understanding up and discussion about where the most significant challenges or ‘pinch points’ in delivery are manifest.

**Figure 3: screenshot showing some of the comments placed on a whiteboard mapping the service user's journey**



The first tranche of comments related to marketing and take up of the service amongst village halls. It was understood that committee members typically seek out support when they have a particular need, as was exemplified by the large number of halls who got in touch during the Covid lockdowns to understand the regulatory requirements placed on them. This led onto a conversation which suggested there is some uncertainty about whether the way the service is communicated is effective and how ACRE members might seek to engage halls that don't currently use the service. There





appeared to be two strands to this – whether there are opportunities to increase halls awareness of the service through improved marketing and if there are better ways of presenting information and advice, so it is more easily accessible and understandable to service users.

Closely related was a discussion about how ACRE members capture information about users and their experiences. Some of the workshop participants said they were using CRM applications to track conversations with village hall committees in their area, whilst others described much simpler processes for keeping records about the number and type of enquiries received. Few were routinely capturing feedback from people that had used the service. There appeared to be interest in looking at ways that user data could be better collected and used locally to improve the service, possibly by combining the efforts of members or standardising processes and applications nationally.

Several of the participating village hall advisers also explained they struggle for capacity sometimes when responding to enquiries and requests for support. A lack of staff capacity was cited as a primary reason for this, however other factors such as peaks and troughs in demand, as well as groups which soak up a disproportionate amount of time were mentioned. This can be a particular problem for advisers who work alone in their county as it is difficult to arrange cover during periods of leave or sickness and some hall committees can be impatient for a response.

## Village Hall Adviser Survey

Having identified several areas of the user’s journey that could be improved – namely marketing, user insight, and managing demand, we decided to conduct a survey to see how village hall advisers experienced these aspects of the service across the wider network.

The data below summarises responses to the survey we circulated in March 2022. It was completed by 37 advisers, representing 34 ACRE members (**Appendix A**).

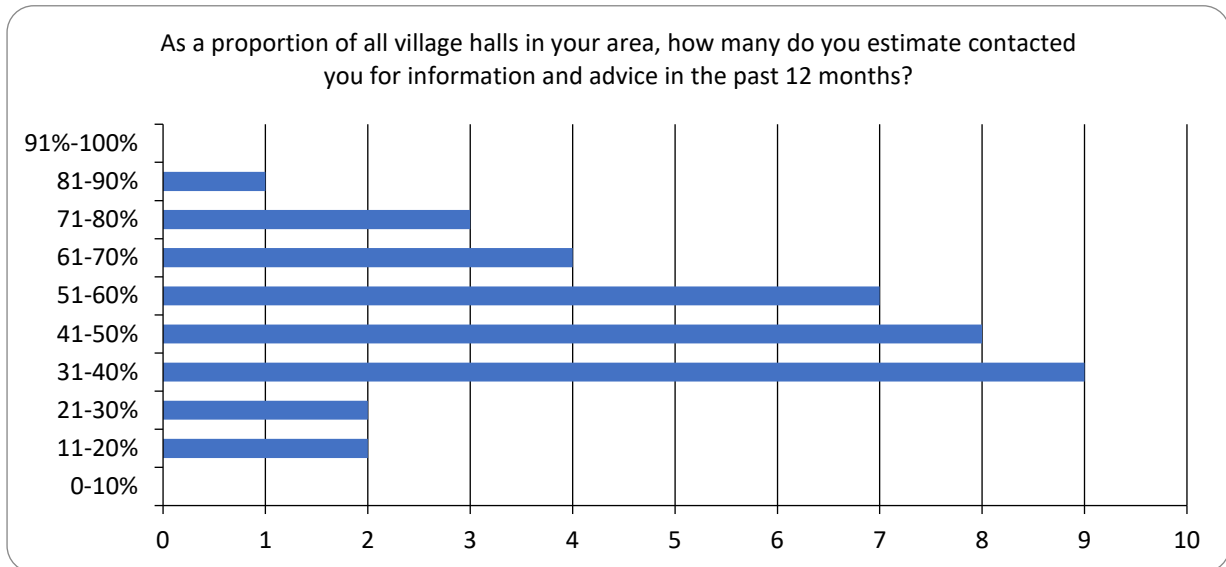
### Marketing and take up

In the workshops, participants suggested that some halls in their area do not engage with the support they provide. To see whether this was an experience shared by advisers across the network, we asked how many halls they estimate contacted them over the past 12 months.

**Figure 4** shows that most advisers (24) believe they had contact with 31 -60% of halls in their area, whereas eight said they reached a higher proportion. Four advisers thought they reached fewer than 30% of halls in their area.



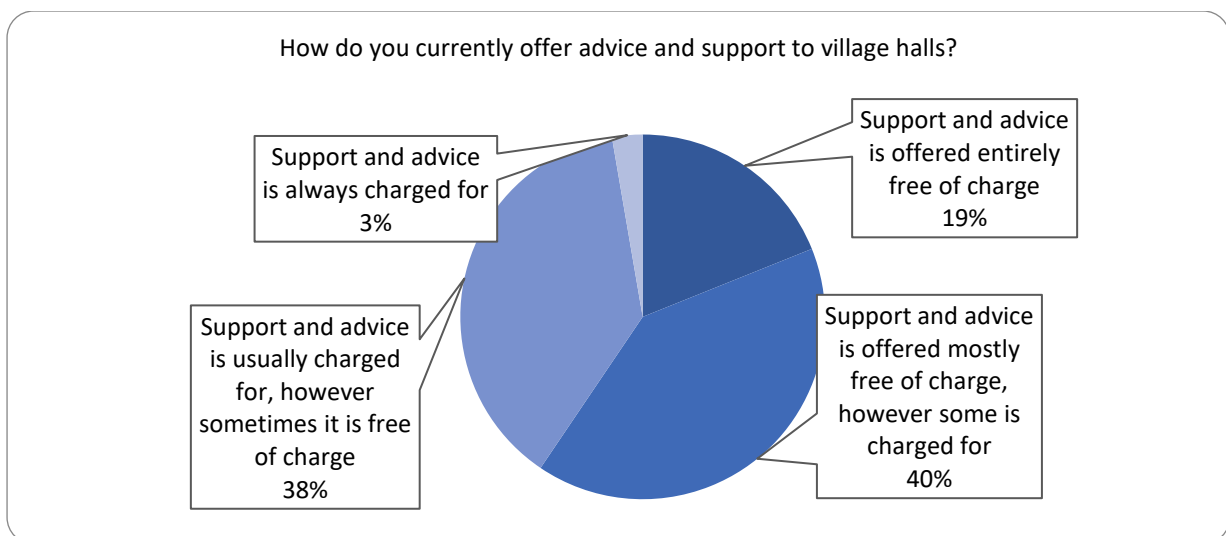
**Figure 4: percentage of village halls locally that ACRE advisers believe contact them for information and advice**



We compared the claimed rate of engagement with halls with that of ACRE member’s income and the number of halls which exist locally, however no obvious relationship was found. Of the four respondents claiming engagement with fewer than 30% halls, two commented that they lack staff time and capacity which may be a factor.

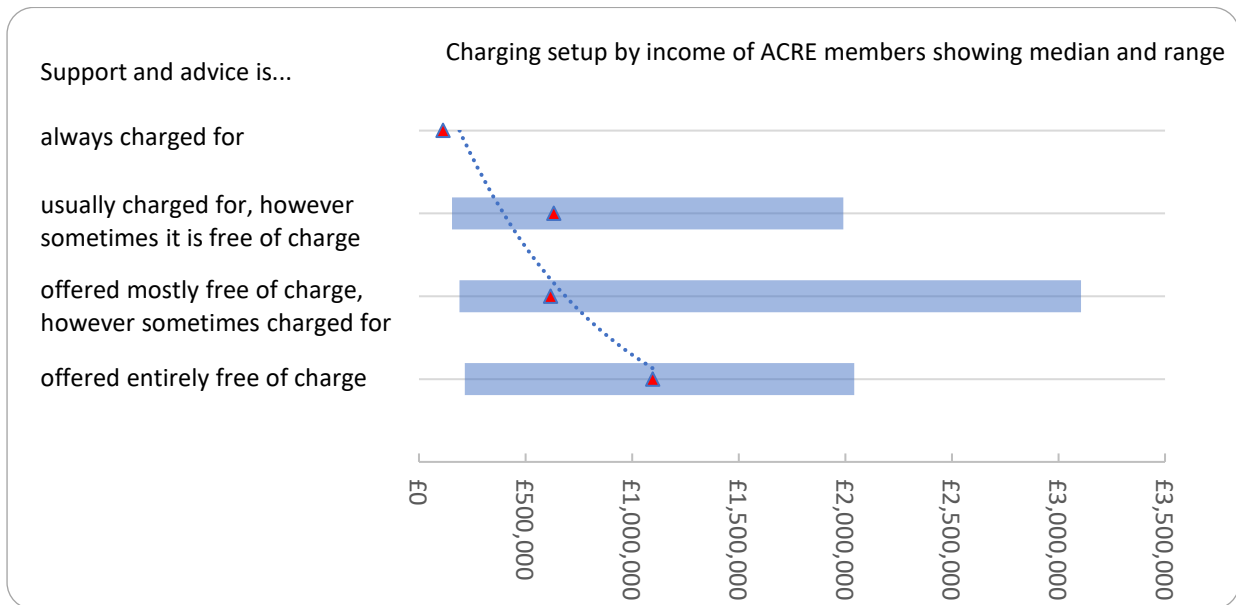
Although the village halls service is operated nationally, the way that ACRE members resource and deliver the service varies. A key distinction is how members charge for the services they provide. **Figure 5** shows that most ACRE members operate a blended charging structure where some services are offered at no cost to halls, whilst others are charged for. There are far fewer members that offer their services to village halls completely free.

**Figure 5: how ACRE members currently charge for services to village halls**



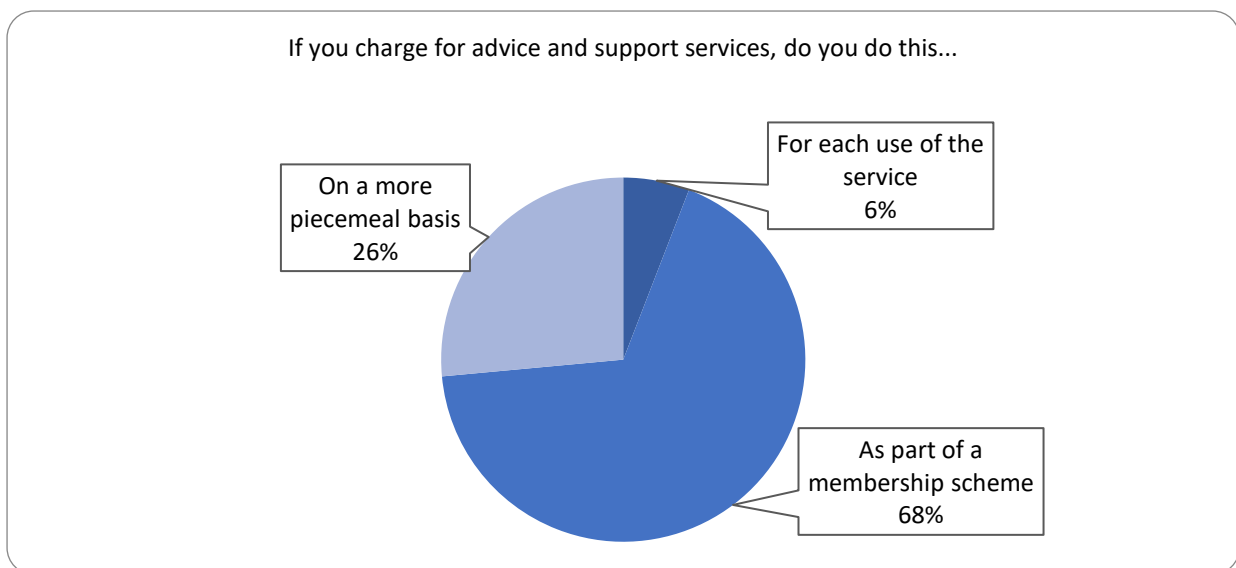
Further analysis suggests there is a correlation between the income of ACRE members and how they charge for the village halls service (**Figure 6**), albeit there are several outliers which limit the significance of the observation. Only one ACRE member charges for support and advice all the time. This organisation is one of the smaller organisations in the ACRE Network.

**Figure 6: charging setup by ACRE member's income showing median and range**



Of those respondents who said their organisation charges for services provided, more than two thirds (23 advisers) explained their organisation principally does this as part of a paid membership scheme, whilst the rest said fees were collected on a more piecemeal basis or for each use of the service (**Figure 7**).

**Figure 7: the circumstances in which ACRE members charge for support to village halls**



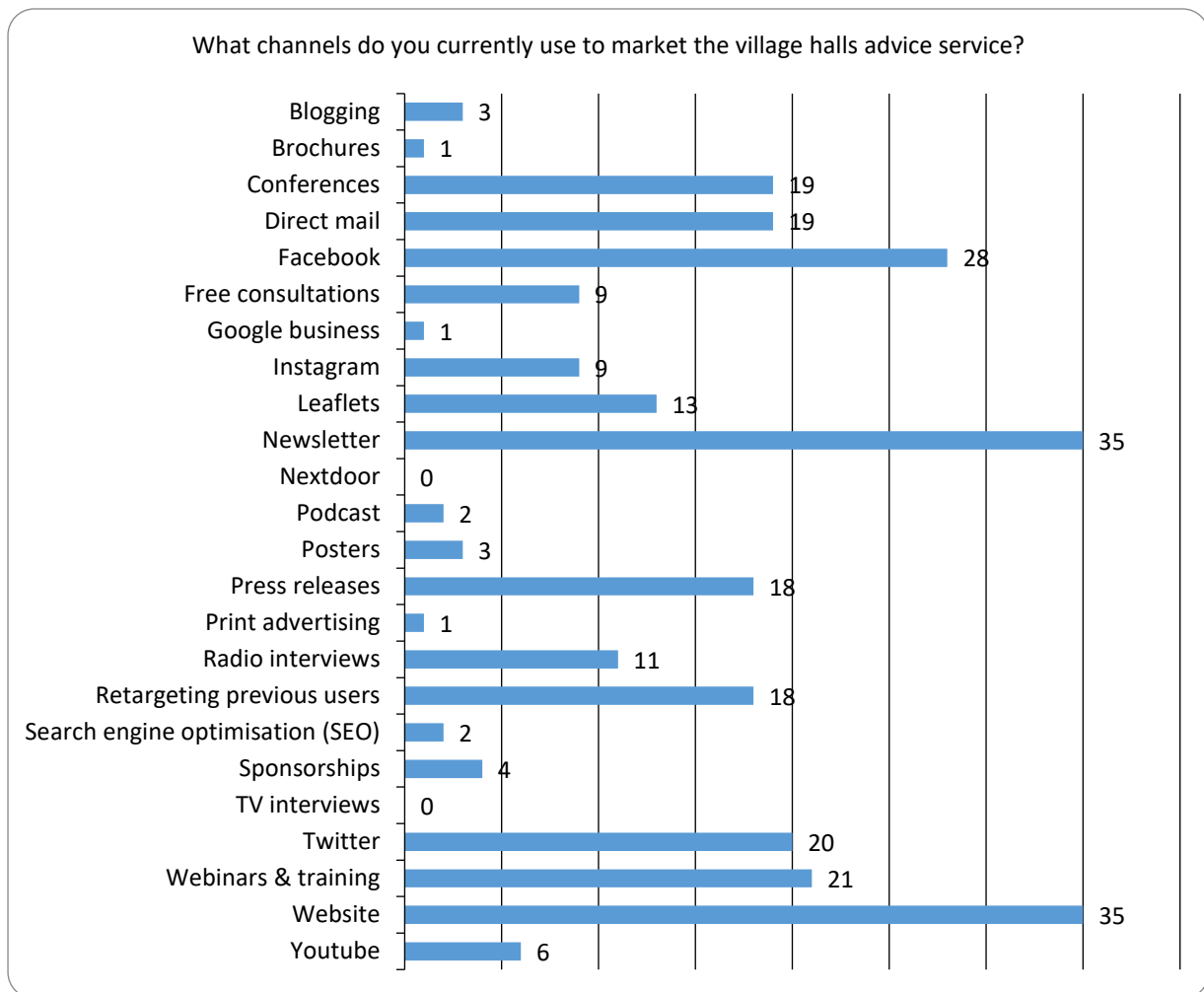
If reach and take up of the village halls service is a concern, it is important to understand how the service is currently communicated locally. To find out, we asked respondents what marketing channels they use from a comprehensive list of conventional and digital mediums.

**Figure 8** shows the distribution of publicity channels used by respondents. Most advisers said they publish information about the service on their website and in regular newsletters, with social media, webinars, direct mail and conferences also identified as popular methods of engaging service users. Retargeting service users was also mentioned by 18 respondents.

It is noticeable that fewer advisers state they are publishing more narrative pieces explaining their work using blogs, podcasts, TV and radio interviews or print media. These may present opportunities to widen awareness amongst those not already engaging with the service.

Advisers representing the two organisations with the lowest rates of claimed engagement with village halls also appear to be using a limited range of marketing channels (specifically website, distributing leaflets, newsletters, and events) indicating that more could be done to increase awareness of the service they offer.

**Figure 8: how advisers try to reach village halls**



Additional comments made about the effectiveness of different marketing channels are particularly instructive. **Figure 9** shows the frequency of different types of communication that are particularly valued, including direct mailshots, the circulation of newsletters, and the delivery of events and webinars which allow advisers to maintain and build relationships with halls which is seen as being important.

*Direct contact with halls is the most effective way of engaging, we keep in touch with all members and non-members on a regular basis and we have seen many non-members take out membership as they value the service and like the fact they know who to get in touch with if they need help and support (ID: 185422091)*

Eight respondents also noted the importance of word-of-mouth referrals amongst village hall committees and other members of the community, underscoring the importance of maintaining a strong reputation for service delivery.

*VHs come to us because [we have] been recommended by other halls and contacts in the community (ID: 185696650)*

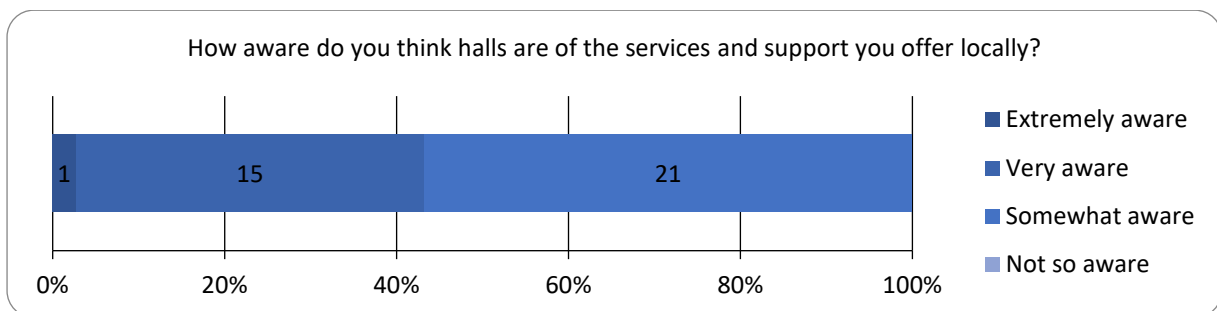
*Most sign ups come via word of mouth (ID: 186154260)*

**Figure 9: most frequent comments about effective marketing channels**

Comment type	Frequency
Direct mailing	12
Newsletter	10
Website	8
Word of mouth	8
Webinar	6
Training events	5
Facebook	5

We also asked advisers to provide a view on how aware village halls in their area are of the services offered. **Figure 10** shows that 16 respondents were confident that halls are either ‘extremely’ or ‘very aware’ of their services, compared to 21 who said halls were ‘somewhat aware’. Reassuringly, no one selected the option saying halls are ‘not so aware’.

**Figure 10: advisers’ view on village halls awareness of their service**



Of course, awareness, isn't the only reason halls might not engage with the services of ACRE members. **Figure 11** ranks the most frequent responses given to a question asking advisers if there are any other barriers that stop halls from getting in touch and seeking support and advice.

**Figure 11: reasons cited by advisers as to why some village halls do not reach out for support**

Comment type	Frequency
Digital barrier	12
Financial barriers	8
Single point of contact (info not passed between committee members)	5
Trustee time/ capacity	4
Fear of intrusion/ change	3

The most frequently mentioned barrier was the inability or perhaps unwillingness engage with services provided online, often associated with the age and skills of committee members. Poor broadband connection was also cited by a couple of respondents.

*Some trustees do not use e-mail, which means they could miss notifications (ID: 186340499)*

*We push all of our marketing out through digital channels and I think this only hits a small percentage of people [...] There is still a percentage of the population, mainly those that are retired or who are over the age of 75, who choose not to engage digitally. (ID: 185639767)*

The cost of accessing the service was also raised by 8 respondents as a barrier who variously implied that halls either lack the financial means to pay for services or are reluctant to pay even when the fees are negligible.

*The tiny rural halls with small turnovers may struggle to justify our membership costs (ID: 186396082)*

*Some are reluctant to pay a membership fee - less than £1 a week it equates to (ID: 186151223)*

*Sometimes there is a reluctance to have to pay for information and support when they believe that they can access free information from other agencies (ID: 186354984)*

Other factors thought to affect take up included a lack of communication between committee members, trustees not having enough time to engage, and fears of intrusion and change.

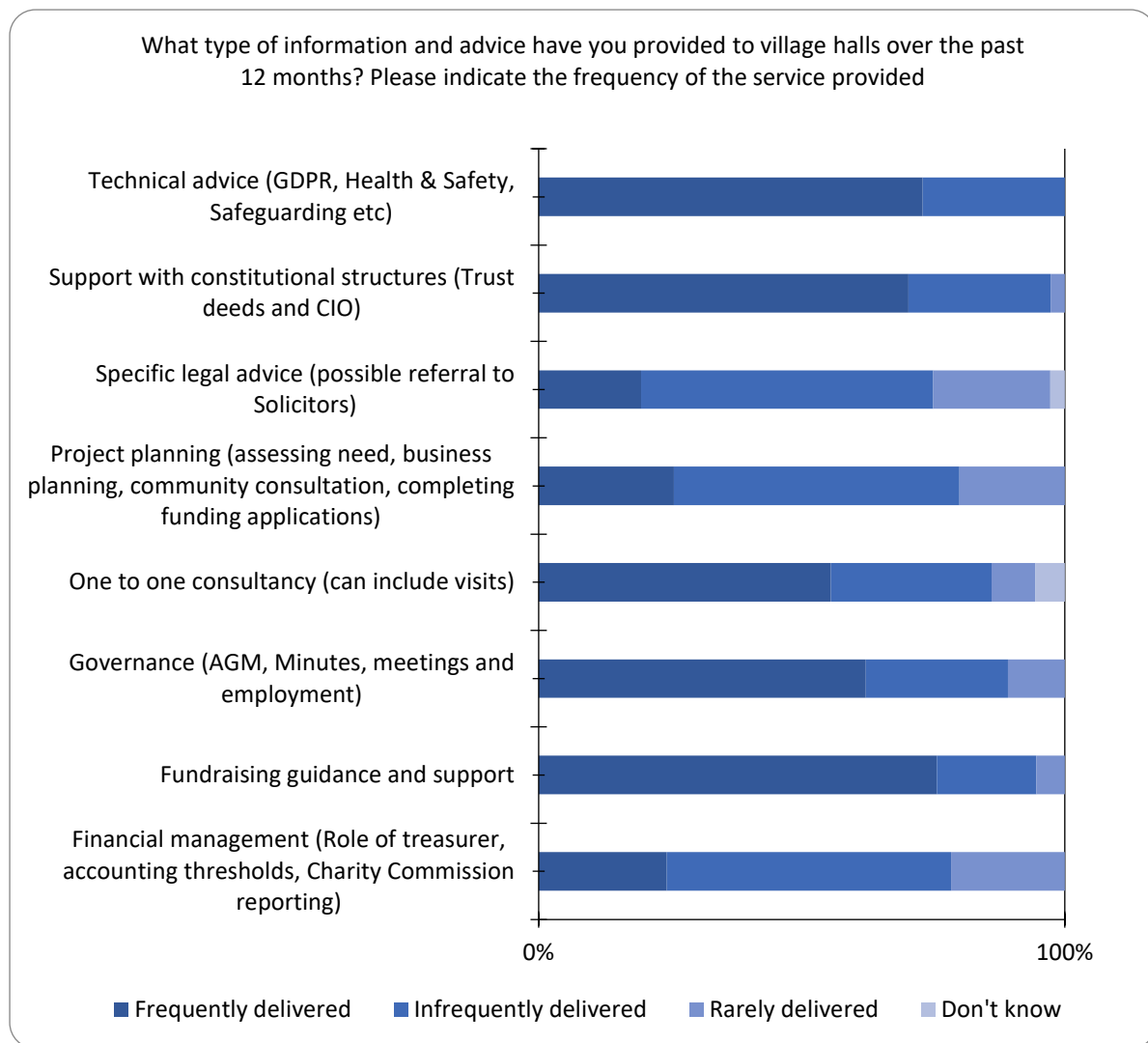
### User insight

During the workshops, participants demonstrated an eagerness to develop their understanding of service users expressing the view that this might help them improve the support they provide. The following information summarises responses to follow on survey questions establishing some key facts about the support provided, the type of data ACRE members gather, as well advisers' views on what more they would like to know about users.



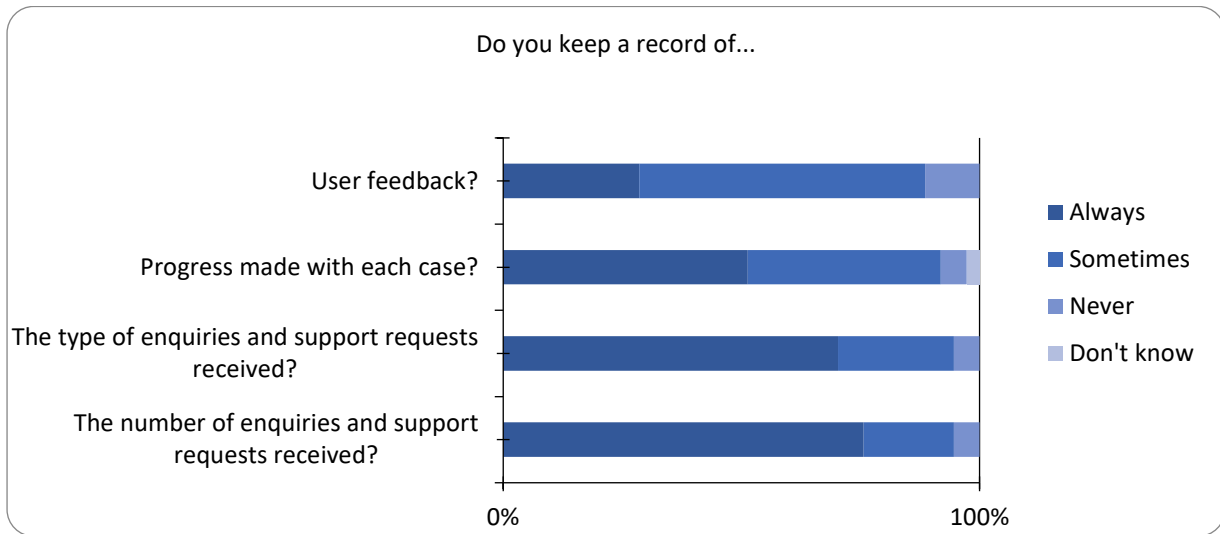
**Figure 12** details the different types of assistance provided to village halls by frequency. Most commonplace is the provision of technical advice (such as GDPR, safeguarding and health and safety considerations), support with constitutional structures and help with fundraising. Less frequently provided services include support for financial management, project planning and the provision of legal advice including referrals to specialist solicitors.

**Figure 12: type of information and advice provided to village hall committees**



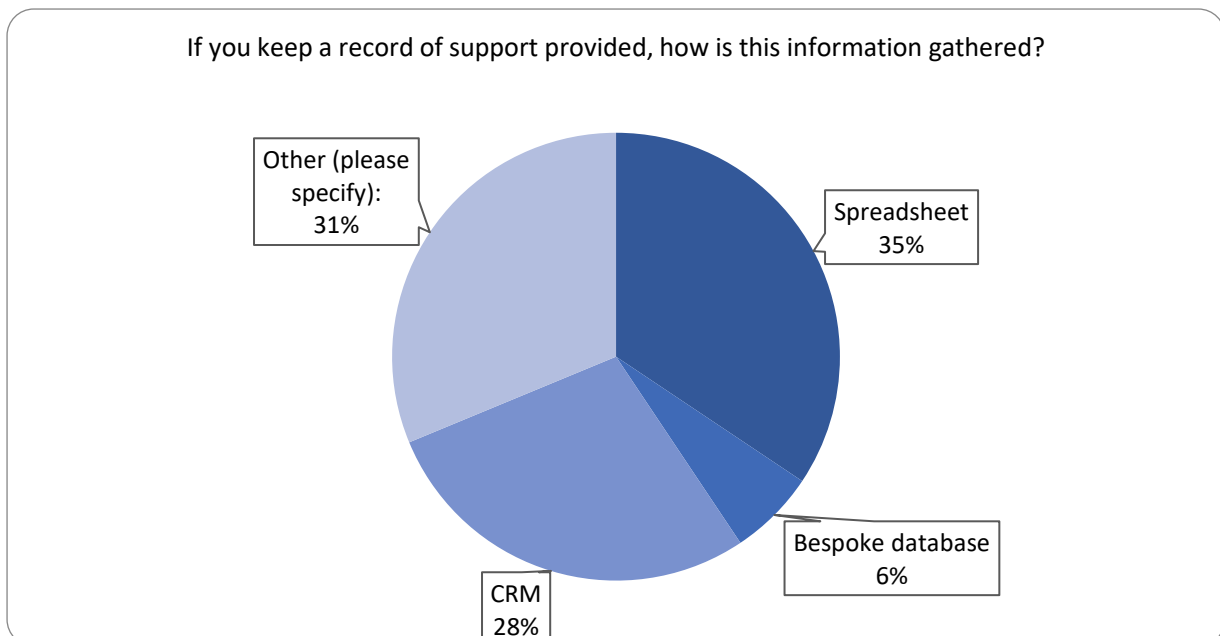
When advisers were asked what data they capture about service users, the majority said they always keep a track of the number and type of enquiries. About half keep a record of the progress made with each case, but only 10 respondents said they routinely capture feedback from beneficiaries (**Figure 13**).

**Figure 13: frequency with which different types of record about users are kept**



**Figure 14** shows how advisers are currently capturing this data. About a third use simple spreadsheets, nine were using more comprehensive Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems and two said they had bespoke databases. Of those who specified 'other' three of these respondents claimed to use Word documents to keep case notes about service users.

**Figure 14: method by which user data is captured**





The last question we asked was what more respondents would like to know about service users. **Figure 15** shows the frequency of the different types of responses we received.

**Figure 15: other types of information advisers would like to know about service users**

Comment type	Frequency
Up to date contact details	7
Basic info about village hall & committee	7
Committee challenges & support needs	6
Reasons why halls not seeking advice	3

Seven advisers said they would benefit from having more up to date contact details for halls. Their comments suggest that this information can be difficult to keep up to date, especially as committee membership of halls changes over time.

*Having up to date contact details would be a good start (ID: 186292241)*

*we would like their contact details (GDPR compliant) (ID: 185428886)*

*Ideally, we'd like to have at least 2 contacts for every hall (to allow for changes on the committee) (ID: 186743928)*

*Notification for when contact details at halls change .... Chairs new e mail address etc (ID: 187085270)*

Similarly, the same number of respondents said they would appreciate having more up to date basic information about halls, particularly that of the management committee.

*We need to capture more detailed information on the type of facility when members join. Age of facility, capacity, trustees, digital capability of committee, user groups etc. (ID: 185639767)*

*Size/type of hall/who's running the hall (unincorporated charity, CIO, parish council etc), location & nature of catchment area (ID: 185711365)*

A further six respondents provided a little more context for this, explaining that the reason they want more information about management committees is to develop a better understanding of the challenges they face and their support needs.

*Insight into local issues affecting the hall in question (ID: 185876006)*

*We always want to know what their current issues, challenges and opportunities are so that e can develop appropriate support, events, training or information sessions. We do address this by facilitating a short survey to halls, although the returns can be disappointing at times. (ID: 185482019)*

Three respondents also said they would like to know more about halls that do not currently engage with them and why.

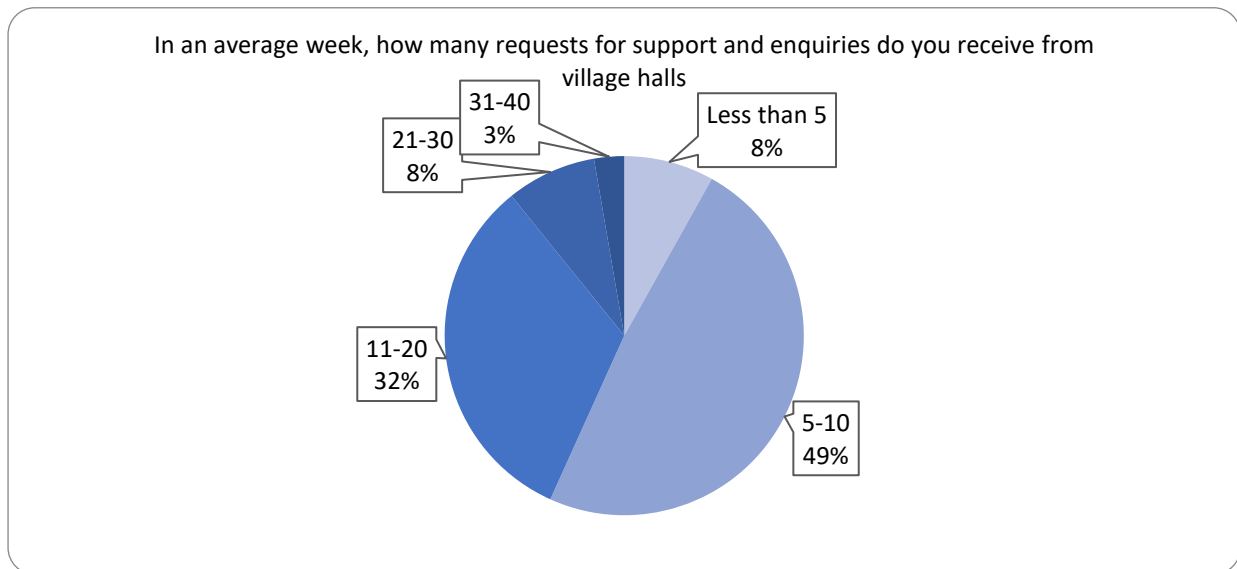
*We'd love to know from halls that aren't in contact with us where they go for support and advice and if there is anything specific that are doing that stops them coming to us (ID: 185696650)*

### Manging demand

The final survey questions sought to develop a more detailed understanding of how advisers handle the requests for advice and support that they receive, their experience of this and views on what more can be done to help them with this work.

**Figure 16** details the volume of requests advisers claim to receive in an average week. Five to ten approaches from village halls is typical of demand placed on approximately half of respondents to the survey.

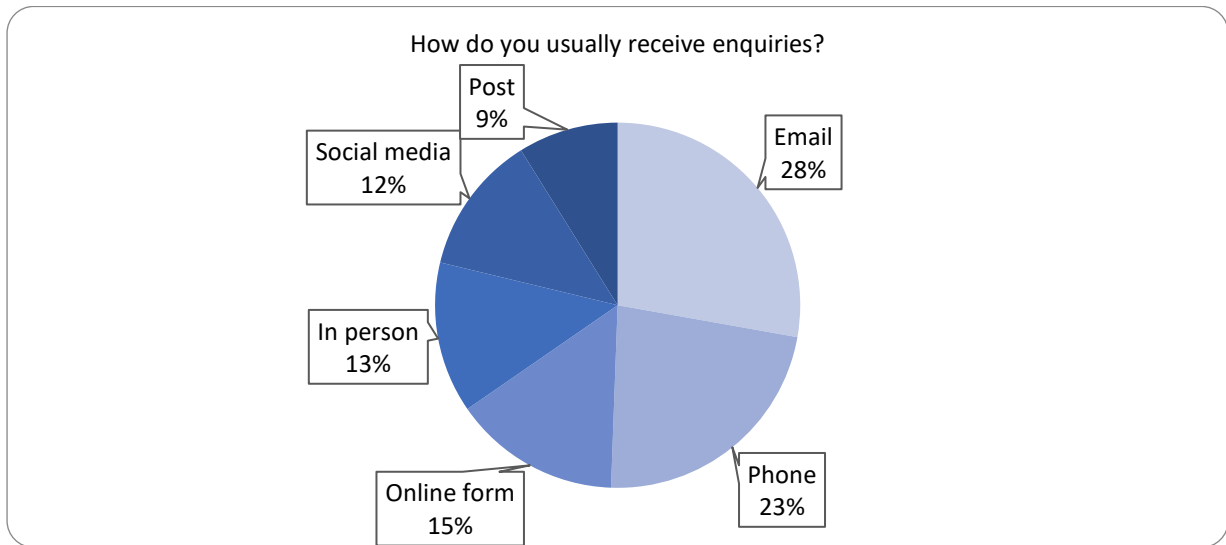
**Figure 16: number of requests for support from halls received each week**



A further one third of village hall advisers handle between 11 to 20 requests for support each week. The outliers are four advisers who claim they respond to over 21 support requests per week representing Devon (which has a large number of village halls in their county), Northumberland and Northamptonshire (where there is a higher-than-average reported take-up of the service), and Gloucestershire (for which there is no obvious reason for the larger volume of enquiries). Conversely, advisers working in Humber and Wolds, Bedfordshire and the West of England receive fewer than five requests for support each week (the latter two having a lower-than-average number of halls in their area).

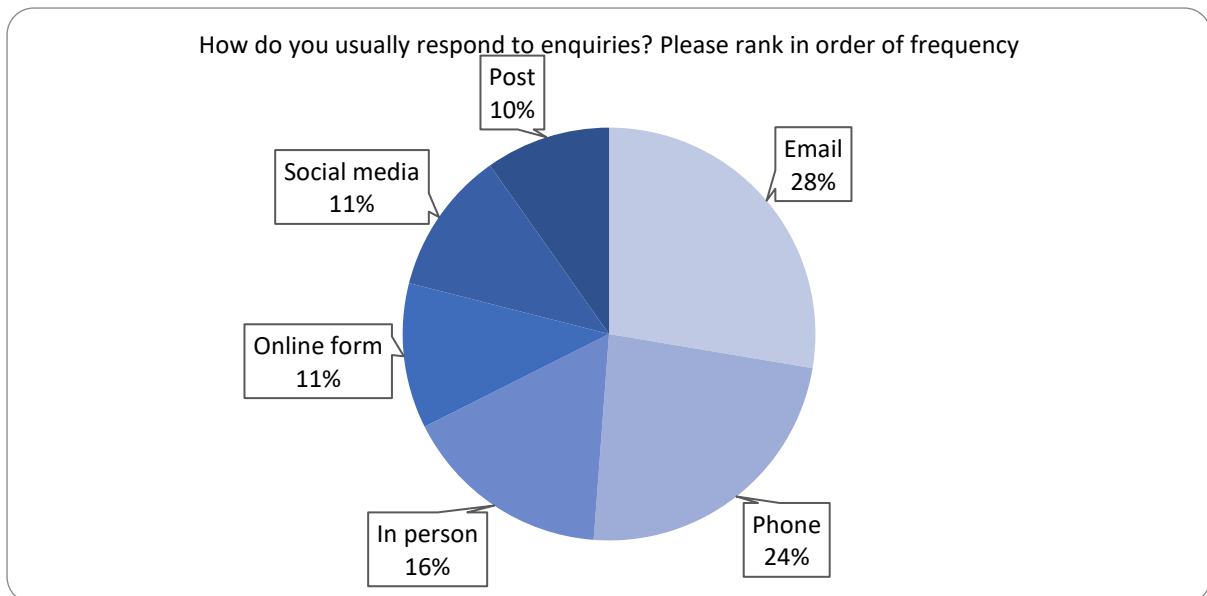
When designing the survey, we thought it would be useful to learn about the methods by which requests for advice and support are made as this can provide an indication of service users digital appetite. **Figure 17** shows that over half of all new approaches are made digitally, either by email, online form or through social media. Just under a quarter of halls reportedly get in touch by phone, whilst the rest either present in person (at our members offices presumably!) or by post.

**Figure 17: method halls use to contact ACRE members**



Unsurprisingly, the way advisers respond to enquiries broadly reflects how service users get in touch (**Figure 18**). It also suggests that the majority of enquiries and support requests are met in writing (60%), although it would be useful to know when and for what purposes calls and visits in person are made.

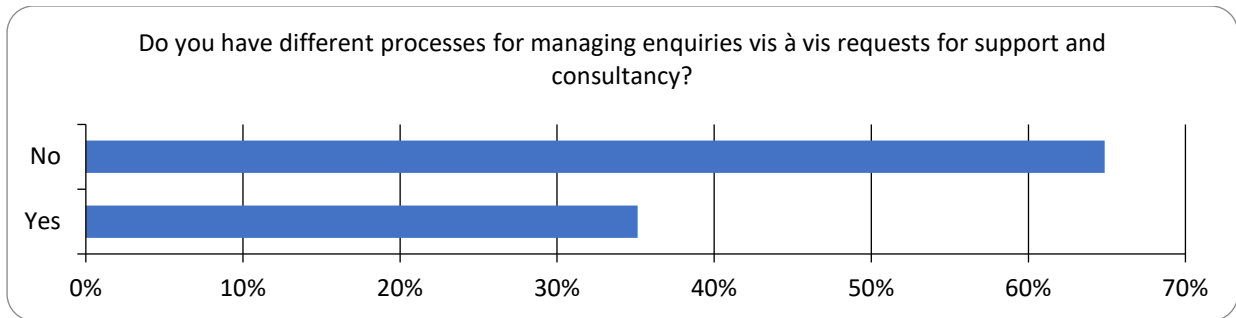
**Figure 18: method used by ACRE members to reply to halls**



31 advisers said they provide consultancy services either frequently or infrequently. This tends to be when a request for support requires specialist input or longer-term hands-on work. Having anticipated this, we wanted to find out whether different processes were being used to provide this type of service. **Figure 19** suggests that only third of respondents differentiate their service offer in this way.



**Figure 19: percentage of advisers who say they have different processes for responding to general support requests and consultancy**



The additional comments made against this question provide a fuller picture (**Figure 20**).

**Figure 20: comments about the methods used to differentiate between responding to general support requests vis à vis consultancy**

Comment type	Frequency
Bespoke consultancy support on quotation	11
Depends on complexity of request	9
Pro bono initial consultation support	4
Paid members get more support	2

11 advisers said they provide bespoke consultancy support on quotation.

*Consultancy is managed outside our membership offer and will be agreed on a case by case basis. (ID: 186054575)*

However, many of the same respondents said that proposing paid consultancy services depended on the complexity of the request or if they had exceeded pro-bono support. It may be useful to know more about the thresholds for determining this and whether this varies significantly from one ACRE member to another.

*Enquiries which are going to involve a significant amount of officer time are advised that the more detailed level of support is not covered under membership or other funding streams and are therefore chargeable (ID: 186396082)*

*All our members benefit from one-hour free advice and support (in practice usually much more than this!) Most of this is by email / phone through the Village Hall Adviser. If hall committees require further support e.g., consultation, fundraising, I will forward this onto our consultancy team who will usually then arrange a meeting online or in person to discuss their requirements and the additional costs. (ID: 185868229)*

Two respondents pointed out that halls that have membership locally receive more in-depth support and advice.

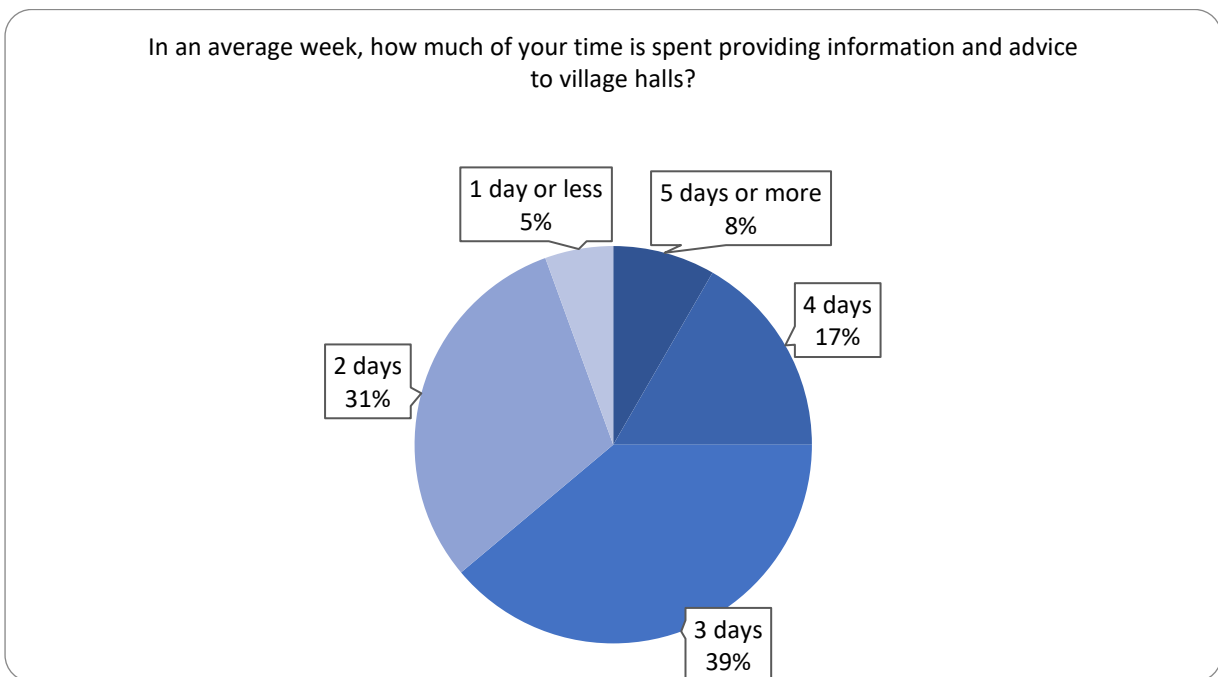
*We give more support to paid subscribers than we would to a general enquiry although try to sign up halls that make an enquiry but aren't already subscribers (ID: 186154260)*



*If halls pay for our Tier 2 membership, they receive consultancy for free as and when needed. If they do not pay for Tier 2 membership, each request would be dealt with and priced separately. (ID: 187129631)*

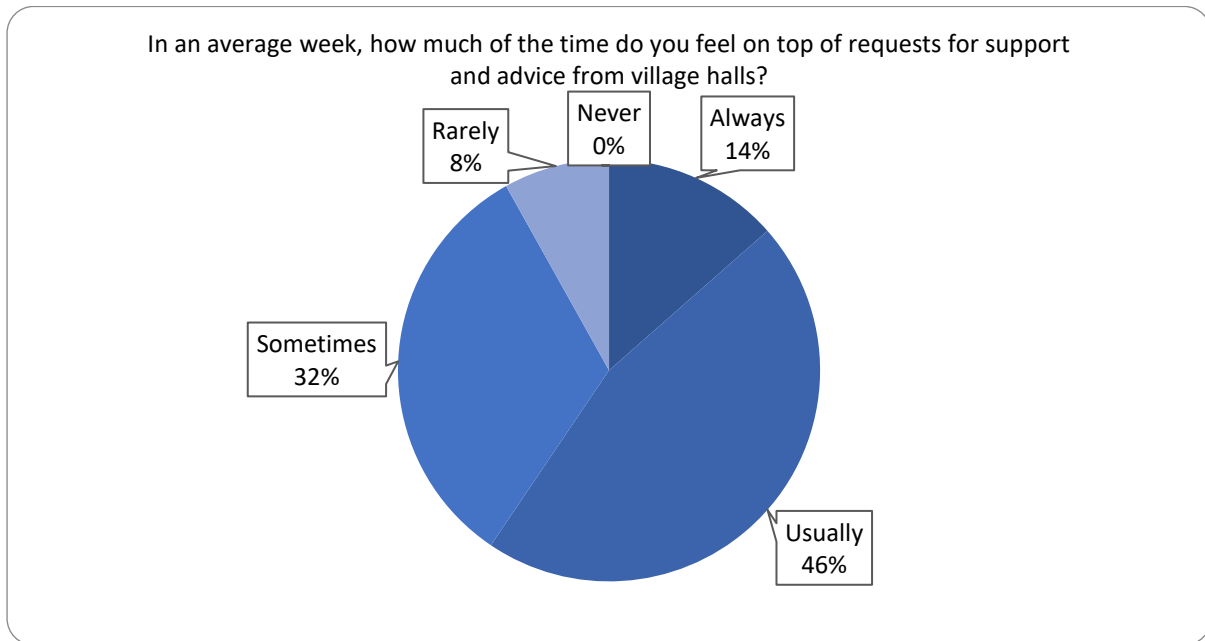
Respondents were asked how many days on average they spend responding to halls each week. **Figure 21** shows the majority of advisers responding to the survey support halls on a part-time basis; two advisers only work one day, 11 work two days a week, 14 work three days a week and six work four days. There are only three counties where advisers work full time in support of village halls although it should be noted there are other areas where two or more advisers cover a county between them.

**Figure 21: time advisers spend responding to enquiries from village halls per week**



As some of the workshop participants said they can feel overwhelmed with the volume of work at times citing a lack of capacity, we wanted to see whether other colleagues in the network also experience this stress. **Figure 22** shows how survey respondents claimed they feel on an average week. The majority (*n* 22) said they always or usually felt on top of requests for support, compared to 15 who said this was only the case sometimes or rarely. These findings do correlate with the workshop feedback insofar as they suggest that managing demand is a concern for colleagues.

**Figure 22: how advisers feel about handling requests for support from halls on an average week**



Of the three respondents who said they rarely feel on top of requests for support, all three areas also report much higher uptake of the service in other areas which could compound this experience.

Flowing on from the previous question, we also asked respondents for their views on what more could be done to help them manage demand for support from halls. **Figure 23** provides a breakdown of the different types of comments we observed.

**Figure 23: comments from advisers about what would help them manage demand from halls better**

Comment type	Frequency
More officer time/ capacity	11
Simpler/ easier to find resources between ACRE members	7
More proactive/ early intervention with halls before problems arise	4
Better information sharing between members	3
CRM	3

Unsurprisingly, the most prevalent comment made by 11 respondents was a desire to have more time and capacity with which to respond to halls.

*More capacity within our staff team. We have a small team of community development workers and VH advice is just one aspect of our work. (ID: 185696650)*

*More time, but that's not really affordable (ID: 186292241)*

Linked to this were a few comments about how having more capacity to support halls would allow advisers to take a more proactive approach to upskilling committees, rather than responding to problems as they arise.



*My dream world would see regular training for trustees, particularly new ones, either actual or by accessing on-line modules. This would bring about a large increase in enquiries initially, as halls got their affairs in order, but should make them more self-sufficient in the long run. (ID: 185916238)*

*It's hard because we mostly see groups when they realise they have ceased to be compliant some while ago and need a vast deal of support. Early intervention would be the logical solution but when we reach out to groups before crisis point, they tend not to understand / identify / accept that they need to right their situation. (ID: 185490661)*

But there were also seven advisers who expressed a view that more information could be provided to halls online, perhaps as part of a member's area that might also negate the need for advisers to provide bespoke responses all the time.

*Having some basic information resources available for users to download as needed rather than coming through me (ID: 187129631)*

*Having a much better portal/subscribers' area where trustees can enter a subject then find all the advice in one area ie. relevant info sheets and topic documents, videos, case studies, forum threads or advice gleaned from forum threads. (ID: 186154260)*

*One of the things halls complain about is that they can't find information in the ACRE Info Sheets and I must admit I find the same. It's not always obvious where info will be. Also, some are very lengthy to read through. So if the sheets were in HTML and searchable - like the gov.uk info - that would make them much more accessible for halls, and they could more easily find the particular information they need. This would reduce the need for my input. (ID: 185711365)*

On a more operational level, three advisers said it should be easier for them to share best practice and technical documents with colleagues in the network.

*Perhaps more cross county sharing of resources, e.g. newsletter articles, training materials. (ID: 186354984)*

*Basecamp is a great resource, [but] a better file sharing facility would be beneficial as it's quite often hard to find what you need because of the way attachments are sent out (ID: 185639767)*

CRMs were also identified as a potential solution for better managing contacts and sending out communication.

*A good CRM would be very useful (ID: 185868229)*

*We do need a better database for recording our contacts, the halls, and our activity. (ID: 186743928)*

*To have a smoother CRM system which can be easily navigated to send out updates or mail merges. (ID: 185975063)*

More specifically, we asked participants whether they had any specific ideas for digital solutions that could be used to improve the village halls service. **Figure 24** details the main types of suggestions made.



**Figure 24: ideas for digital innovation**

Comment type	Frequency
Most support can be provided online	4
Freely available basic advice	4
Video learning resources for halls	4
Present more information online	3
Peer networking for halls	2
Trade/ commercial supplier directory	1
Directory of halls	1
VHA training	1

A handful of respondents answered stating the pandemic had demonstrated most support for halls can be provided online. There was particular mention of Zoom as being more efficient than face to face meetings.

*It can all be done via email - Covid proved that (ID: 185489360)*

*Zoom has helped us reduce our travel and increase our reach to halls for briefing meetings. (ID: 187085270)*

The same number of respondents also said that some resources for halls could be presented online. A specific suggestion was the use of short videos to make this information more interesting.

*To have more digital ways of presenting some of the content for example to include video or training videos which illustrate standard systems or step by step guides. (ID: 185975063)*

*My only thought is to have a resource of short videos that give a summary of key points, legal requirements etc on a particular/common issue/question which in some cases would provide the information and guidance they were looking for or at least give them food for thought to contact a VH advisor to explore further. (ID: 185482019)*

One adviser said they were already looking to publish this type of information for members only suggesting some sort of paywall is being considered.

*We wish to implement a much more interactive and user-friendly subscriber area. (ID: 186154260)*

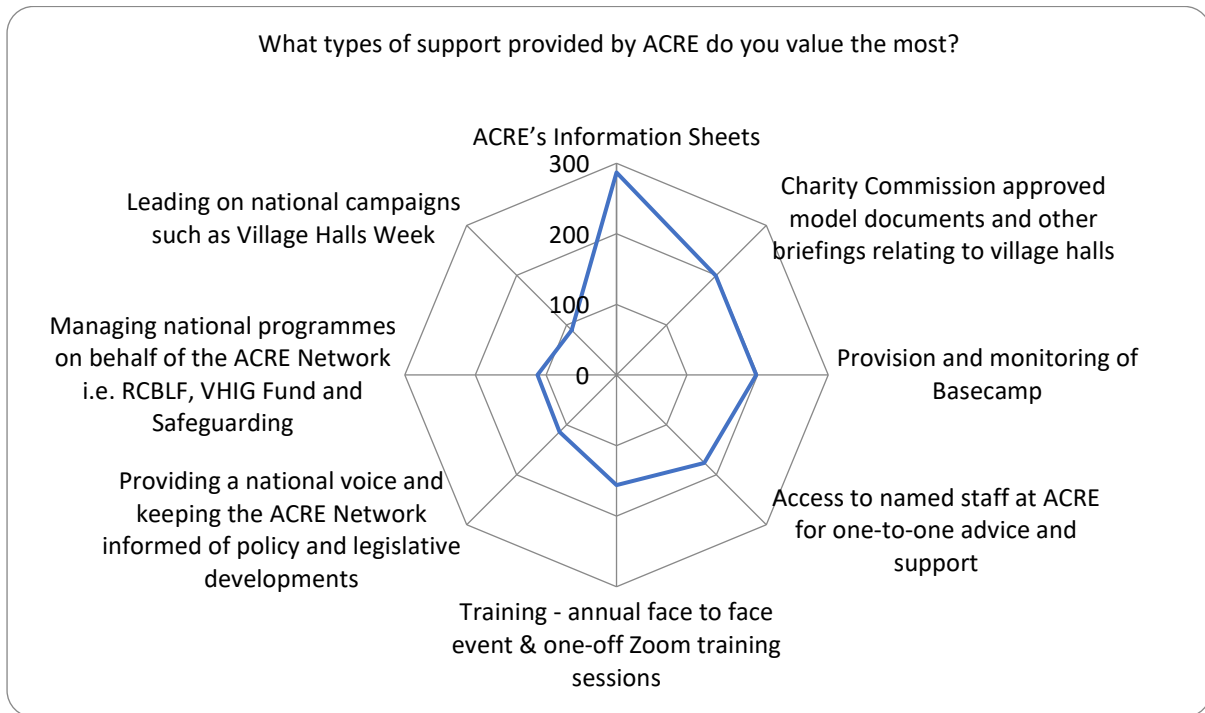
Other suggestions were more disparate and included mention of providing opportunities for halls to network online, creating directories of halls and trade suppliers, and more training for advisers.

To get a better sense of ACRE’s role in providing infrastructure support for the village halls service, we asked respondents to rank the different types of support they value the most. **Figure 25** shows that technical advice and resources such as ACRE’s information sheets and model document are the most valued vis a vis advocacy and influencing work. On reflection, this is not surprising given that these resources are frequently used in adviser’s day to day work, whilst ACRE’s operations at a national level is probably less tangible and distant. These findings do, however, give weight to suggestions made with respect to making information and resources more readily available.





**Figure 25: how different types of support provided by ACRE nationally is valued**



As a final question, we asked respondents what more they thought ACRE could do to support village hall advisers. **Figure 26** summarises the different types of comments that we noted which largely tallies with how respondents valued our existing functions, as above.

**Figure 26: views on what more ACRE could do to support advisers**

Comment type	Frequency
Nothing more	8
Guidance & resources	8
VHA training	8
Document sharing	6
Internal communication/ notifications	5
Mentoring	4
Village halls week	3
Pooling capacity & resource across network	3
Free legal advice	2
More funding!	2

Reassuringly, eight advisers responded saying they valued the support ACRE provides but couldn't think of anything else that would help them in their work.

*ACRE already does a fantastic job and we couldn't do our jobs without your support. It's difficult to suggest improvements bearing in mind that ACRE also has limited resources. Carry on what you are doing please! (ID: 186354984)*



Respondents also said they valued the information sheets and technical advice provided by ACRE, but suggested these could be further developed, updated or added to.

*Access to bespoke village hall information and resources for advisors is essential - it is an extremely niche area, and even when an issue affects more than just village halls (e.g. Covid or even all charities) there's a need for village hall specific information / interpretation. (ID: 186743928)*

*Keep the information sheets up to date. The health check is a good resource but it's very out of date. (ID: 186184715)*

*New information resources on environmental issues e.g. energy audits, renewables etc (ID: 185868229)*

The same number of people also made the case for more training, either to help those starting out as village hall advisers, as refreshers, or to introduce new topics. A particularly interesting suggestion was pooling effort and resource across the network so that this could be done.

*Regular ongoing training for VH Advisers - perhaps an induction course for new advisers or online courses / qualifications which we can undertake to increase / update our knowledge. (ID: 185868229)*

*Support sharing of training across regions - or perhaps offer at a national level so that there could be a mixture of local/national training for vhs. Again, avoids duplication of effort [...] Basecamp is great, but sometimes discussing a topic or area of advice in more detail would be really useful. (ID: 185711365)*

Mentoring was offered up as another way of increasing capacity for training and development across the network

*An ongoing training programme for Village Halls Advisors, to ensure we are kept up to date with our knowledge and more frequently than the annual conference [...] I don't know how realistic this is but it would be great to have mentors / experts that we can draw on for specific areas of advice eg legal issues, energy etc. I have been lucky having an experienced Village Hall Adviser who has supported me over the first two years in post but without this it would have been very challenging. (ID: 185422091)*

The other dominant theme that came out of responses to this question was a view that more could be done to improve the way that information and resources gets shared between ACRE and members, particularly with regards to the use of Basecamp. It would appear that some advisers find it difficult to find the information they need there sometimes.

*It is not always easy to find the documents you are looking for in the docs section of Basecamp (ID: 186020269)*

*It would be helpful if you were able to use more than basecamp notifications to communicate with members. Direct emails to make us aware of training, and updates to key documents would be really helpful [...] Basecamp is great - but the downside is that the number of notifications you get is constant, unless you have a daily summary. Even that is a lot to look at. (ID: 185696650)*

A specific suggestion was presenting more technical information as webpages on a password protected area of the ACRE website, for which advisers can take responsibility for updating:

*Rather than relying on searching through Basecamp to find answers to questions I think it would be more time effective to have a section on ACRE's website for village hall advisors where they can access guidance by subject in order to update their own websites. For example, each subject would have its own page of downloadable content which would include not only info sheets but relevant videos, case studies, latest findings etc even videos. This content would be provided and regularly updated by selected advisors in the network who would vet and check that the content was correct. You could have one or two advisors assigned to each subject which they would lead on. (ID: 186154260)*

Other comments made related to support for the annual Village Halls Week campaign and access to free legal advice.



## Concluding thoughts and recommendations

The feedback received during this project has provided greater insight into the way the village halls information and advice service is delivered by ACRE members.

### Areas for improvement

Whilst there are many strengths of the service, there are several areas that could be improved.

#### Take up

The survey indicates that most ACRE members are contacted by a large share of halls in their area each year. But in a few areas, engagement with halls is more limited, and indeed the conversations we had with advisers during the workshops suggest more could be done to increase take up of the service across the board. Digital solutions have a role to play here. When services were moved online during the pandemic, uptake increased, however there were concerns that some people were unable to engage with this new type of delivery due to a lack of digital skills. With this in mind, it's important future development of the service aims to make it easier for village halls committees to access information and advice.

#### Data capture

ACRE members are using varied approaches to gathering user data locally with only a few doing this in a more systematic way. At the most elementary level, this is about keeping a record of halls in the area, including contact details for people on the management committee. Feedback received indicates there are concerns about keeping such information up to date and this can hinder ACRE members ability to maintain direct communication with halls which is considered essential for effective delivery of the service. On top of this, the advisers we spoke to recognise the value of capturing additional data about use of their services, for example information about the number of halls availing of their services, the type of enquiries made and the outcomes from this support. Such information could help them better manage demand, identify opportunities for improving service delivery locally and improve reporting to funders.

#### Capacity to respond to enquiries

Perhaps the most pressing issue that needs to be overcome is ACRE members limited capacity to field enquiries and provide support to village halls. This was spoken about in the workshops and confirmed in the survey which found that just under half of respondents said they don't always feel on top of requests for support. This is down to limited staff capacity (most ACRE members employ just one village hall adviser, usually on a part-time basis) but also perhaps the processes by which enquires are managed locally. For example, 4 in 10 enquiries are met with a telephone conversation or in-person conversation which suggests in depth, bespoke support is being provided. And this is backed up by comments from advisers who say that some enquires are much more difficult to field and take up a disproportionate amount of time. It would be interesting therefore to have better insight into the different types of enquiries that are made and whether anything can be done to streamline responses to more routine, simpler requests for support.



Connected to this is our observation that the pandemic saw an increasing number of enquiries made to ACRE nationally, particularly with respect to accessing information about Covid regulations and reopening. It would appear some groups became wise to the fact that ACRE was producing the information and believed that they could access this faster if they approached the national office first. At the same time, enquiries are received from halls who are unaware of their local ACRE member, or who have struggled to contact the village hall adviser. Because the staff team at ACRE is very small, it does not have capacity to respond to these enquiries directly. Instead, halls are advised to contact their local ACRE member which lengthens the overall journey to accessing information and advice.

### Access to and presentation of technical information

Advisers stressed the value and importance of technical information issued by ACRE to their work. It gives them confidence to provide robust information to village halls and template documents are sought after by groups. However, feedback also suggests that some advisers find it hard to locate the most up to date resources on Basecamp and there is also a view that this information could be presented so it is more engaging and digestible by groups. For example, several advisers suggested that more resources could be presented online in a range of different formats for halls to access themselves, including explanatory short videos.

### Recommendations for digital innovation

Throughout the project we have been working with specialist no-code design agency, SIDE labs to make sense of feedback from network colleagues and identify opportunities where digital solutions could be deployed for the improvement of the village hall information and advice service.

The following recommendations have been developed in response to the challenges identified and are offered up as a means of equipping advisers with digital resources that can be potentially used together to better engage and support halls locally. They are intended to stimulate discussion with network colleagues rather than being a definitive view and require further investigation and development. As such, we have tried to outline both the opportunities and limitations of their use.

#### Developing standardised digital processes for receiving and triaging initial enquiries

Developing a system for receiving and triaging initial enquiries could derive several benefits. It could improve access to the service, capture data about users, and help advisers better manage enquiries.

Currently enquiries are made in a variety of ways; usually by email or phone to ACRE members locally which may necessitate bespoke and possibly time-consuming responses. This contributes to the concerns advisers mention about peaks and troughs in demand, and the way that some groups take up more of their time than others. Similarly, it is possible to imagine how such an ad hoc set up for receiving enquiries is experienced by end users. We are not sure whether it is always clear how groups should seek support; something which depends on where they are based. And the method by which enquiries are made may determine the time it takes for them to receive a response.

It is worth noting that other comparative organisations such as the Plunkett Foundation receive initial enquiries from rural groups nationally using a standardised online request for support form. Once initial details about the enquiry are received, the group's needs are considered, and they are



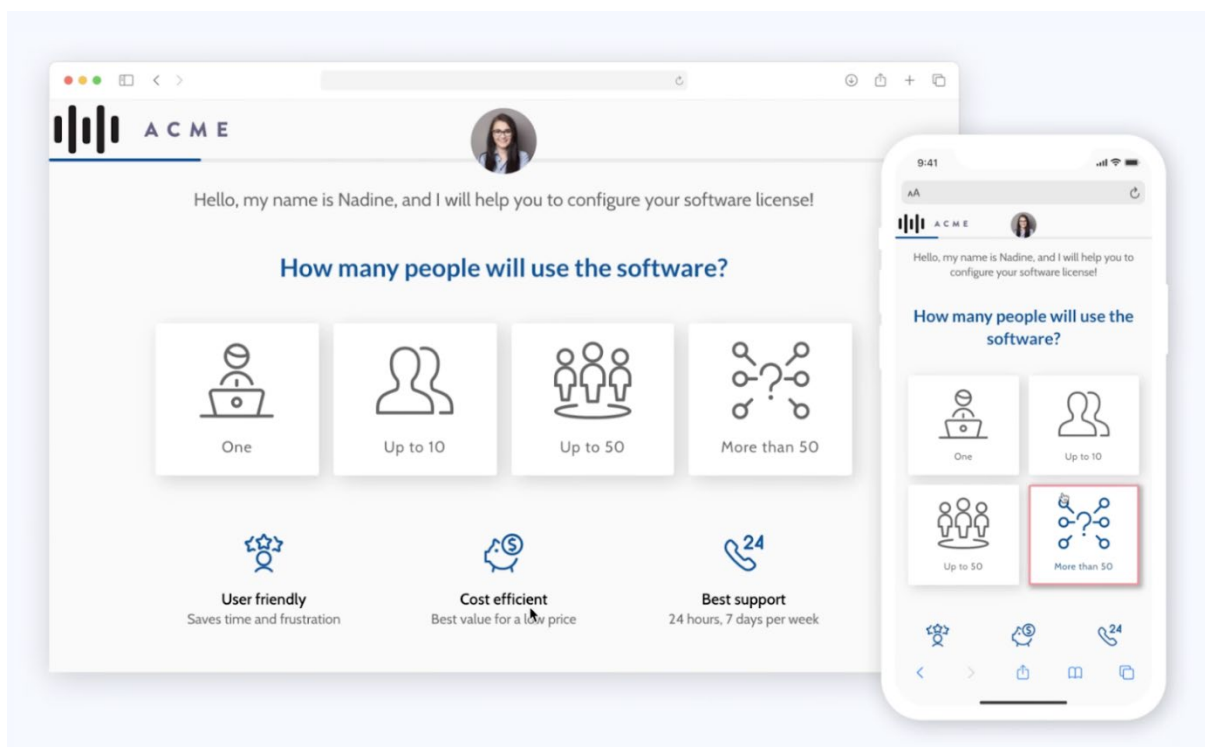
signposted to local support as appropriate. The system allows for a more controlled and arguably fairer means by which groups can be answered.

In thinking about digital solutions that could be deployed to this end, we were acutely conscious that requiring village halls to contact ACRE nationally to make initial enquiries would run counter to the present setup, culture and business model underpinning existing service delivery across the network. However, it is possible to imagine a more standardised solution developed and agreed nationally, which may be used to field enquiries locally. This would be possible where ACRE members share use of the same application but are able to embed this on their own websites and isolate local enquiries to follow up.

There are different digital products that could be used for this purpose. Online survey applications and databases (e.g. [Typeform](#), [Smart Survey](#), [Airtable](#),) could be created to obtain basic information about a group which advisers could access.

[Heyflow](#) is another form-based product. It's designed so users don't have to think too hard about typing and can answer questions with simple interactions making it a smooth and quick user experience.

**Figure 27: Hayflow screenshot**



A more sophisticated way of receiving enquiries could involve the use of logic to identify different types of enquiries and point the user to the most appropriate type of support. This would require the development of questions that quickly get to the nub of what the user's needs are. Typeform can be used in this way, however development would require a high degree of testing and its usefulness may be limited to triaging enquiries at a very basic level as form builders like this are not designed for complex flows.



Dedicated chatbots have much more utility in this respect as they are purpose made applications intended to help organisations manage enquiries by capturing initial information, identifying the most suitable response and directing users to resources that are usually offered online negating the need for a human to be initially involved.

This type of system would allow users to help themselves with more straightforward requests and reduce the time advisers spend fielding initial enquiries freeing up their capacity elsewhere. Combined with recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI), chatbots also have the potential to learn from successful conversations to optimise the conversation flow for the next clients and derive insight into the needs of the wider population, drawing on responses to a small number of questions.

The main challenges associated with this solution is categorising the type of advice that could be delivered this way, mapping out the conversation flow which would best direct users to the relevant advice and having an online bank of resources for the chatbot to point to.

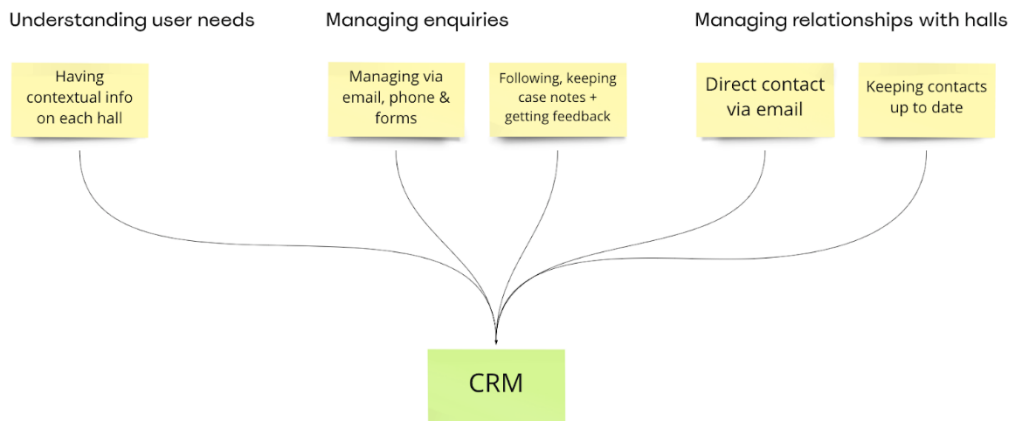
Understanding when an enquiry needs to be handed to a human is also critical as more complicated issues are unlikely to be answered by generic information. Some people also may not feel comfortable conversing with a bot and they certainly don't want to have a frustrating experience in not being understood.

Figuring out the best route for technical implementation is another consideration. A chatbot could be trialled with a couple of ACRE members to see how this model of delivery works in practice, which could then be developed and improved. The appeal of a chatbot is generally quite divisive so it would be interesting to see the reception and the results that come out of it.

### [Implementing a CRM to better record and manage relationships with village halls](#)

A CRM (customer relationship management) system would be necessary to manage large amounts of user data, not limited to basic information about groups and the enquiries they make, but also the ongoing relationships that ACRE members have with them. This knowledge would allow advisers to keep on top of requests for support and enable them to provide more tailored human responses when necessary, depending on the needs of village halls that have been logged in the system.

**Figure 28: how a CRM could respond to different types of needs**



Being an all-in-one solution, specific features of a CRM could include:

- Bringing together data from different communication lines in one place (email, phone, online forms)
- Having a profile for each hall with standardised information
- Recording case notes and record of enquiries for each hall
- Tracking progress made with supporting halls
- Automating the process of directly contacting halls
- Automate the process of collecting post support feedback
- Generating clear reportable data on hall engagement and advice provided

If deployed nationally a CRM could address concerns raised about the current geographically varied approach to record keeping, ensuring that all ACRE members are able to keep information about halls up to date and use this to become more efficient and effective in the delivery of support.

A centralised repository of information could also create opportunities for greater collaboration and sharing of resource between ACRE members, for example if cover needed to be provided in an area where the adviser is absent.

Of course, a key balance that would need to be struck is between the time and cost associated with developing and maintaining a CRM, and the benefits that can be attributed to both end users and advisers.

There are many CRM products available and finding the right one that fits in with an organisation's specific structure, management needs, cost and ease of use is a tricky task. Development would require mapping out the information to be captured, how this could be plugged into a CRM and figuring out how records should be acted upon to best manage enquiries. ACRE could potentially take the lead on this work, testing and trialling with a few interested members to pioneer this change. Several advisers reported their organisations are already using CRM's locally so it would be sensible to begin this work by speaking to them and learning about their experiences of this.





SIDE labs do a lot of prototyping, testing and evaluation (specifically with no-code tools) and have developed an approach for testing and validating possible technical solutions as shown in **Figure 29**. This process could be adapted for the ACRE Network.

**Figure 29: SIDE labs approach to identifying, testing and validating possible digital solutions**



Much can be learnt from testing systems in this way, especially before rolling it out to the wider network. What is too complicated? Which systems are immediately ruled out? What problems arose? Which functionalities are the most important?

This process of elimination will help identify and develop a CRM system that would work for the ACRE Network.

### Improving the presentation of information and resources for halls by making content more accessible and engaging online

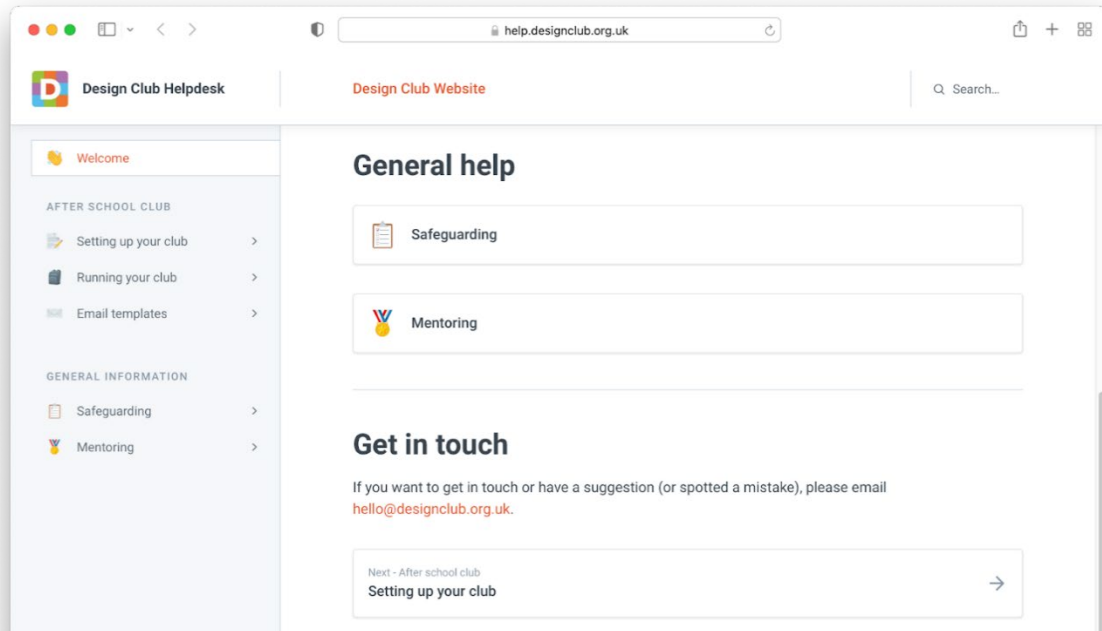
Lastly, there may be opportunities to improve access to, and the presentation of, technical resources made available to village halls using digital solutions. As such it is possible to imagine a greater range of resources being made available to halls online and presented using different types of media, not just written documents.

To take this work forward, it makes sense for ACRE to appraise the different resources that are currently provided to identify those that lend themselves to being made available online and those that do not. For example, more generic advice could be presented using more engaging media without the need for advisers to provide further explanation.

There are numerous ways resources can be presented online, especially if there is interest in moving away from word docs and pdfs and creating a better user experience for both end users and advisers. This could be realised in the form of blog posts, video library's, custom web pages and public links to resources in Onedrive, to name but a few opportunities.

In terms of organising new online content, [Gitbook](#) is a documentation platform that is used to present large amounts of information with a clean and user-friendly interface. It can help organise a better user experience for people looking for information and centralise the network's knowledge for better collaboration. You can even embed videos, docs, and links to create more comprehensive content.

Figure 30: Gitbook screenshot

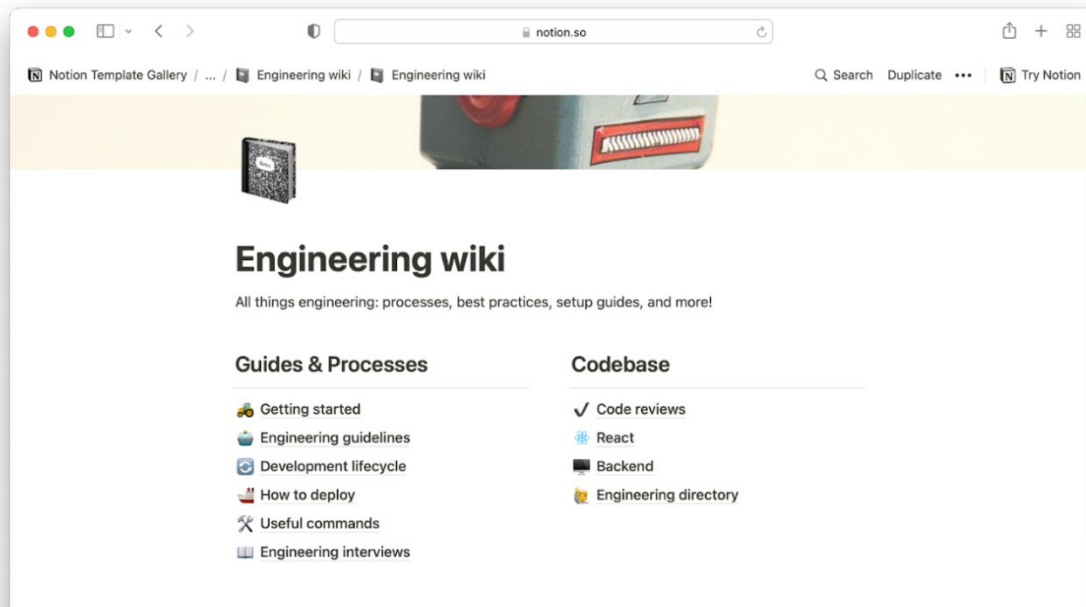


Gitbook has a standardised but flexible layout so all someone has to do is put in and organise the information to build it out. Users can search for resources, see when it was last updated and also provide feedback on whether it was useful.

[Notion](#) is another powerful customisable product management tool which can also be used as a database, website and place to collect notes and resources. With Notion you can embed documents, links and videos easily and organise the whole space in a presentable way by clicking and dragging elements.

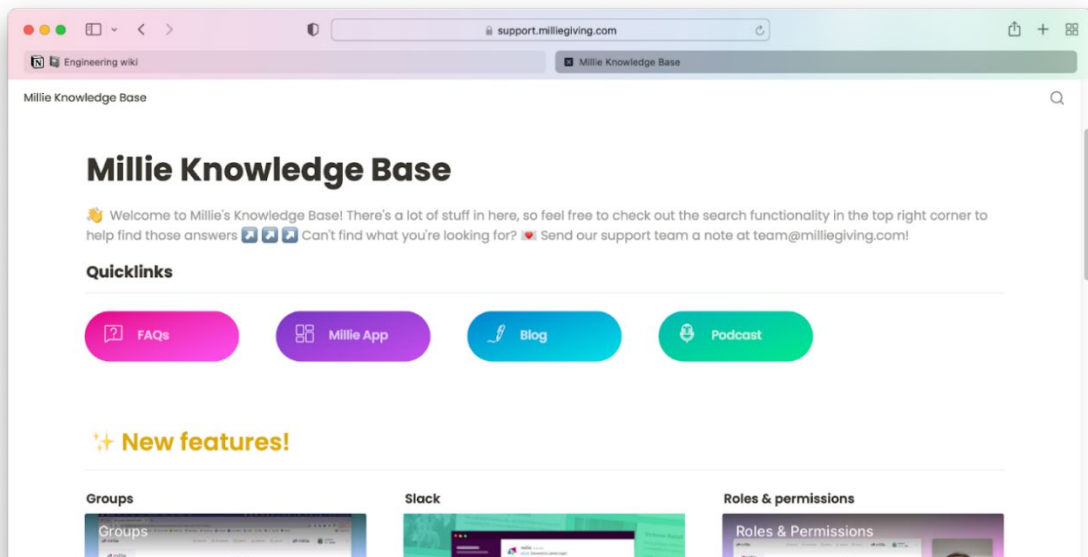


Figure 31: Notion screenshot



Combining Notion with [Super.so](https://super.so) it is possible to turn Notion pages into beautiful and simple custom webpages to host resources within the ACRE’s branding.

Figure 32: screenshot showing website built with Super.so skin for Notion



The beauty of these tools is that they don’t require code or much technical knowledge to build. They are also products in their own right which have teams of designers behind them who are already thinking about user experience. So all you have to worry about is setting up your resources in an organised way and publish.

The challenge with using these tools is that it would require having to do a reassessment of current resources to see how they can fit into these forms of presentation. It may be that existing

information could be copied and pasted onto pages organised by subject matter. Or maybe this could be an opportunity to rethink how some resources are communicated - re-editing and breaking them down or perhaps even creating video content.

Despite this initial work, once information is up, managing and maintaining it should be a lot simpler because of how easy it is to edit and update content. This could open up opportunities for network advisers to also update, edit or create public facing information, if desired.

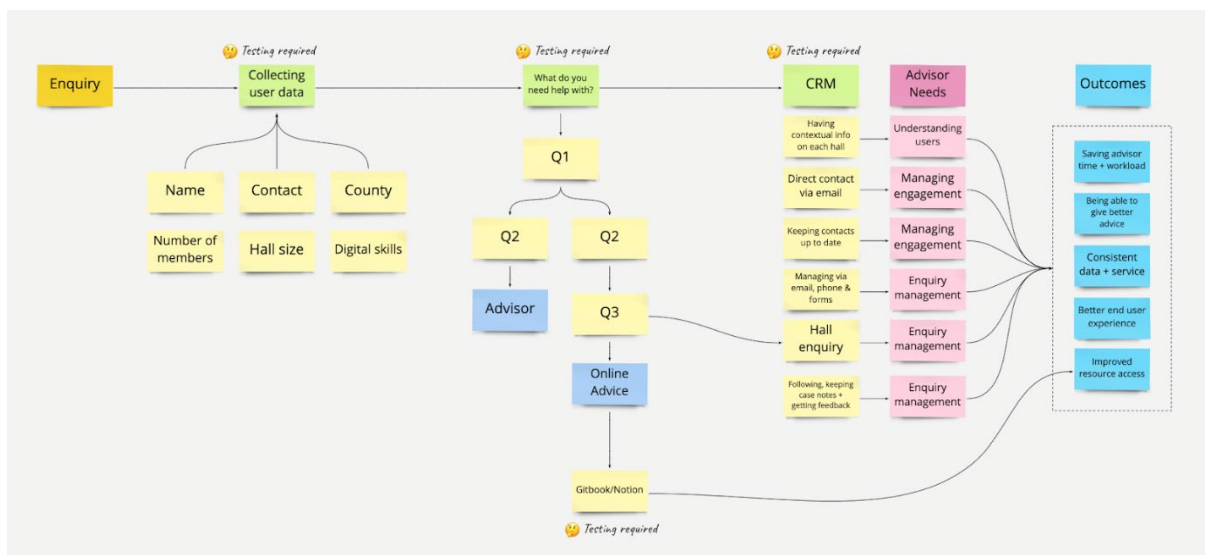
The other consideration is how any newly presented information gets shared with advisers and then distributed to halls depending on their membership. The applications mentioned have different permission and sharing options such as being able to access with a password or only with a private link which will need to be explored further.

### Opportunity for systems to work together

Overall, there is a big opportunity for digital transformation in the way the village halls service is delivered to create a more cohesive, user friendly and capacity boosting service.

The three solutions discussed above have the potential to integrate with and complement each other as shown in **Figure 33**. Information captured at initial enquiry stage could feed information into a CRM which is used to signpost halls to either information and resources offered online, or more bespoke 1-2-1 advice from ACRE Network advisers.

**Figure 33: How enquiry forms, CRMs and new online content could work together to improve the village halls advice and information service**



It is the project team’s view that each of these digital solutions are investigated and considered as part of a wider business review of the village halls advice and information service. This will require significant coordination and resource nationally, and most importantly the involvement of ACRE Network colleagues.



## Appendix A: Survey respondents

ACRE Member	No. VHAs responding
Action in Rural Sussex (AirS)	2
Action with Communities in Rural Kent	1
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity	1
CDA Herts	1
Cambridgeshire ACRE	1
Cheshire Community Action	1
Action Hampshire	0
Community Action Isle of Wight	0
Community Action Norfolk	1
Community Action Northumberland	2
Community Action Suffolk	1
Community Council for Somerset (CCS)	1
Community Council of Devon (operating as Devon Communities Together)	1
Community Futures Lancashire	1
Community First (Wiltshire & Swindon)	1
Community First Oxfordshire	1
Community First Yorkshire	1
Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire	1
Community Impact Bucks	1
Community Lincs YMCA Lincolnshire	1
Community Resource (Shropshire)	1
Connecting Communities in Berkshire Ltd	1
Cornwall Rural Community Charity	1
Dorset Community Action	1
Durham Community Action	1
GRCC (Gloucestershire Rural Community Council)	1
Humber and Wolds Rural Action	1
Northamptonshire ACRE	1
RCC (Leicestershire & Rutland)	1
Rural Action Derbyshire	1
Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire	1
Rural Community Council of Essex	0
Support Staffordshire	2
Surrey Community Action	1
Tees Valley Rural Action	0
Voluntary Action Cumbria - Trading as ACTION with Communities in Cumbria	1
WRCC (Warwickshire Rural Community Council)	1
West of England Rural Network	1

