

Sittingbourne Community Hub Capacity and Demand Report

Venues

Conducted by Swale Community and Voluntary Services
May 2021



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Introduction

Swale Community and Voluntary Services (SCVS) have been commissioned to undertake a survey engaging with the Hirers and Venues in the Sittingbourne area, this survey analysis focuses on the Venues.

This report aims to be beneficial in understanding the level of capacity that Venues have once Lockdown restrictions end and venues begin to reopen. We explore both pre and post-pandemic usage and look at some of the main concerns for Venues when the groups begin to meet again.

With the recent closure of Phoenix House in the centre of Sittingbourne and many users worrying about room hire capacity, we asked the chairman for the reasons behind the closure. He has kindly given us an overview below.

Phoenix House

For almost 30 years Phoenix House was the community centre in the heart of Sittingbourne, providing accommodation and facilities for some 80 community groups and other users to meet and enjoy activities together. Over the last 10 years, however, its financial situation had become increasingly tenuous as costs rose and austerity drove Kent County Council to terminate the grant funding that covered approximately a quarter of those costs. In addition, the building, which is around 100 years old, was deteriorating badly.

Most significantly the central heating boiler failed and the cost of the repair was estimated to be in excess of £100,000, a sum Kent County Council, the owners of the building, could not justify for a building of such poor construction and Swale Community Centres (SCC), the charity that managed Phoenix House, could not afford. Without a functioning heating system, the building could not be used for a large part of each year

These problems were becoming critical as the Covid pandemic hit in 2020 and Phoenix House was required to close. Despite a generous support grant and the furlough scheme, it became clear later in the year that the finances were unsustainable with the building in such a poor state and with great regret the Directors of SCC, decided that it could not reopen.

For many years SCC, concerned by the long term problems, had been working with Swale Borough Council and KCC seeking to identify a replacement for Phoenix House. Although no viable solution was found there was a growing awareness of the importance of community cohesion and wellbeing of affordable facilities for groups to meet in Sittingbourne. The work now being undertaken reflects the strong determination to make provision to meet this need.

Rob Fenton, Chairman

Summary of Key Findings



67.70% of hirers have not hired any spaces during COVID-19

58.3% would feel comfortable in hiring spaces again once lockdown restrictions have been lifted



The most sought after spaces once restrictions are lifted are:



41.9%
Meetings
rooms

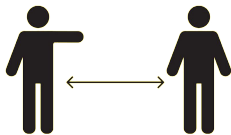


27.6%
Church/Village
halls

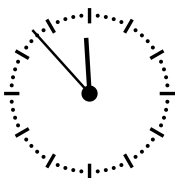


9.5%
Office
Space

59.6 of Venues completely closed their doors during the pandemic



However, 31.2% of Venues have hired out Socially Distanced spaces



70.8% of Venues want to resume their services immediately once restrictions have lifted

88% of respondents want to return back and engage immediately!





Methodology

The questionnaire had 10 general questions and was designed to capture some of the main opinions about future capacity for local Venues in the Sittingbourne region with regards to general room hire and office space. The questions are organised into three thematic blocks. The first one looks into the level of capacity before COVID 19 started impacting these spaces. The second focuses on how these Venues have been impacted and finally, the last set explores the possibility of returning after Lockdown restrictions have been lifted.

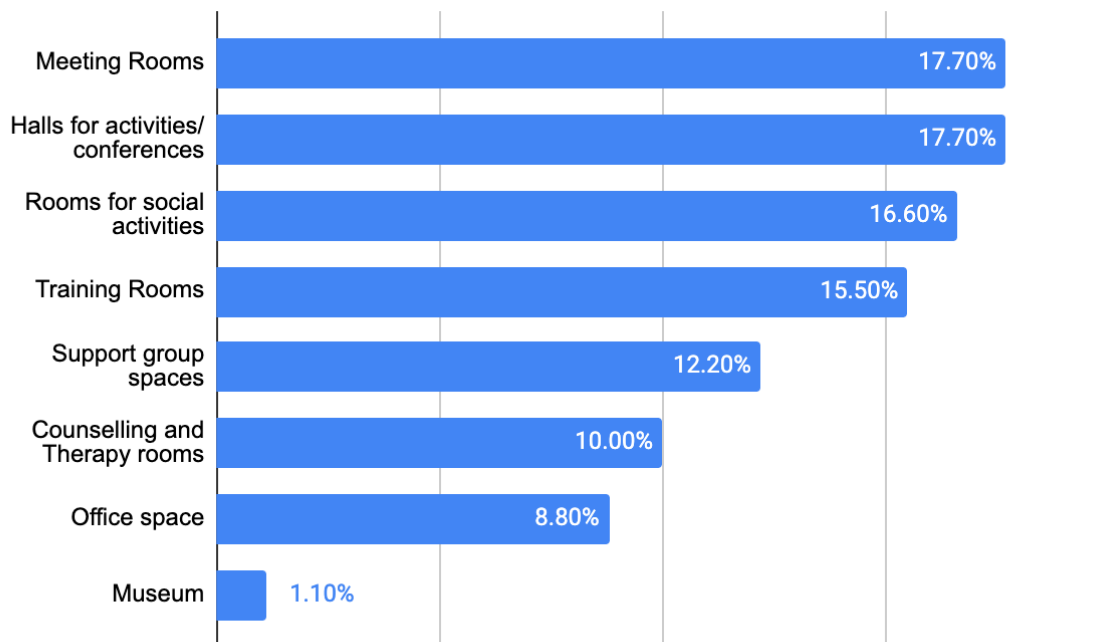
The survey combined open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions with predefined answers offering respondents the possibility to choose. For these questions, an optional space was provided so users can input their own responses if necessary. This open part is considered of great importance for a Survey of this kind as it contributes to improving the interpretation of its overall results and provides additional valuable material.

The survey reached over 320 individuals and the results can be found below.

Detailed Figures

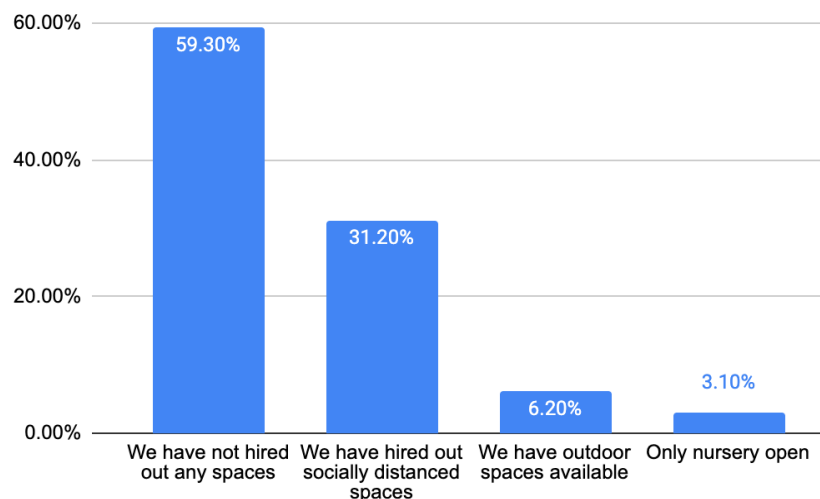
Q1-Q6. Here are some issues the local area will be facing over the next few months as we move towards Lockdown restrictions easing. These questions explore and allow us to compare pre and post-pandemic capacity.

Q1) What type of space for hire did you let out prior to Lockdown, tick all that apply.



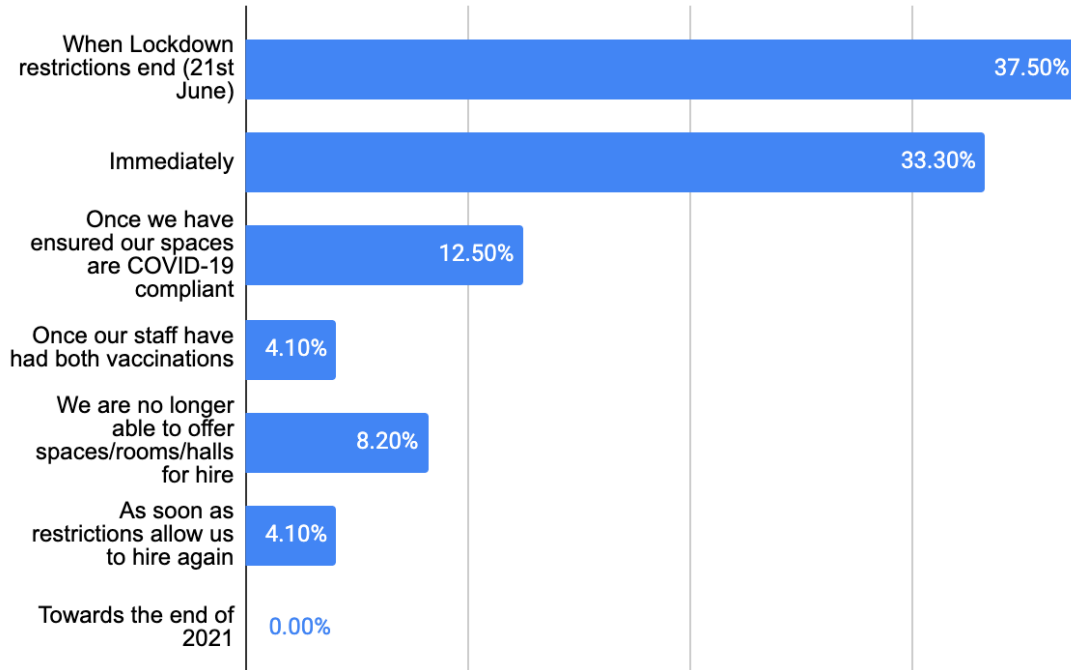
Prior to COVID and Lockdown restrictions Meetings rooms and Halls for Activities had the most capacity 17.70% with smaller rooms ie; rooms for Social Activities 16.60% and Training ranked just slightly less 15.50%.

Q2) What impact has COVID-19 had with regards to your room hire services?



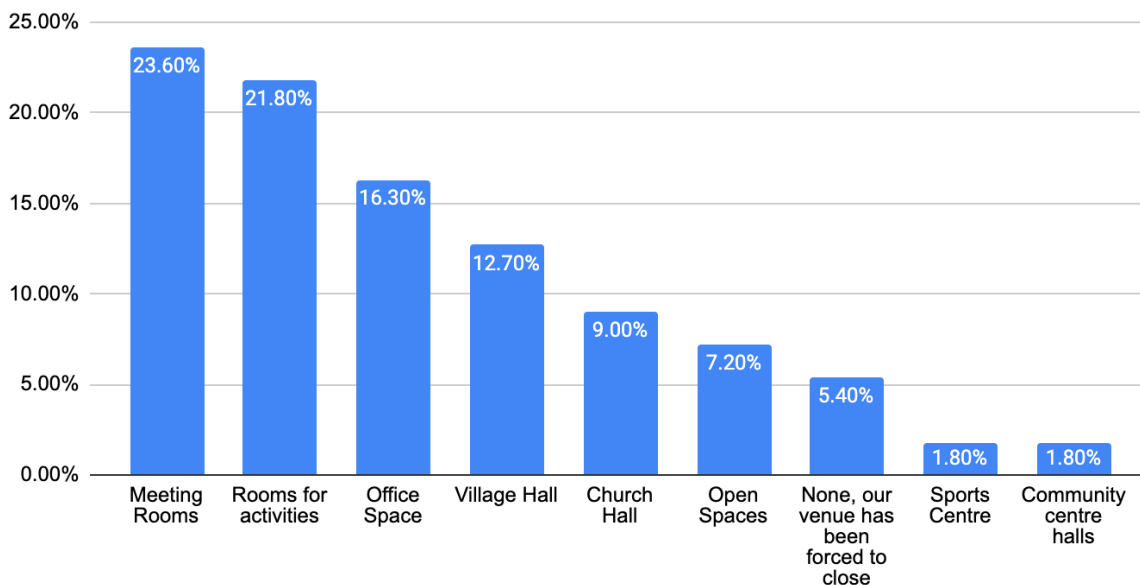
COVID-19 has had a huge impact on Venues hiring out spaces as 59% have not managed to hire out a single room during this period. Surprisingly only 31% have hired out socially distanced spaces meaning that you can infer that 69% do not have that capacity to allow them to engage with the current restrictions in place.

Q3) At what point would you feel comfortable letting out your rooms/halls/spaces again?



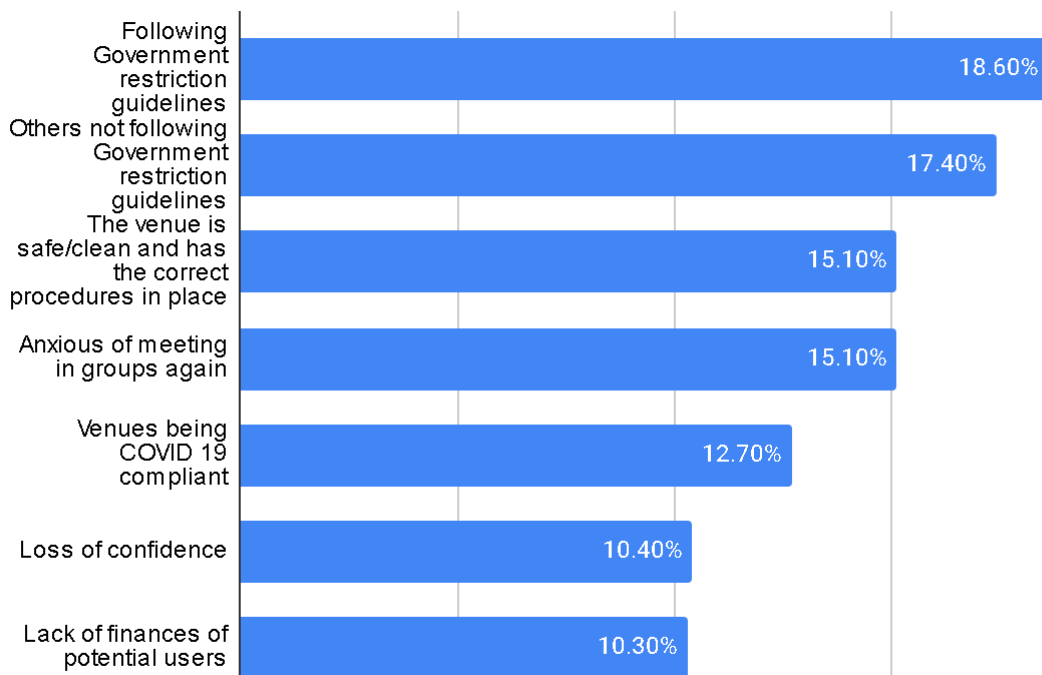
The vast majority of respondents stated that they would be willing to start letting out their rooms/spaces/halls once restrictions have been lifted/immediately/compliant which equates to 83.30%.

Q4) Once restrictions are lifted what spaces would you have available? (tick all that apply)



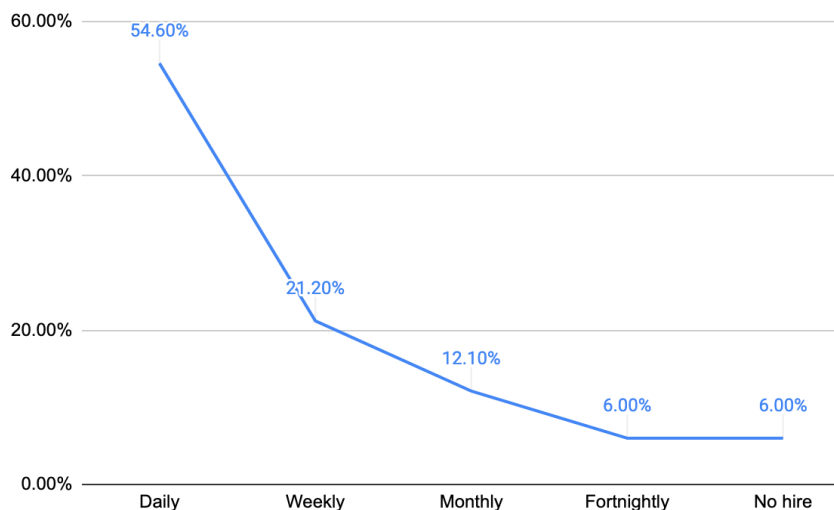
Interestingly it appears that more meetings rooms and rooms for activities have become available following the pandemic if you compare this with question 1. Once again it's clear that Venues will struggle if they are forced to only use Open Spaces if another lockdown occurs.

Q5) What do you feel will be users/hirers' main concerns about attending activities in hired spaces again?



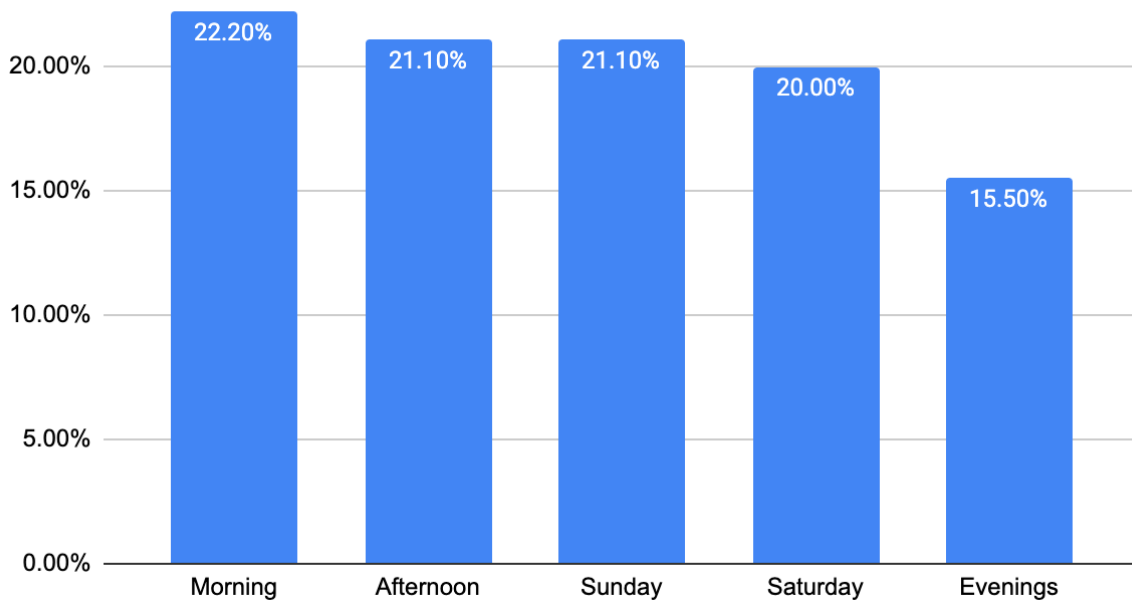
As expected Venues are concerned about following Government guidelines and ensuring that the hirers are following the rules. If you compare this with the Hirers survey it is interesting that 33% believe the Venue being safe/clean is an absolute priority, however, this is seen as a smaller concern 15.10%. It does not appear that the Venues feelings of hirers concerns are consistent with that of the user.

Q6) What will your capacity be once Lockdown restrictions have ended?



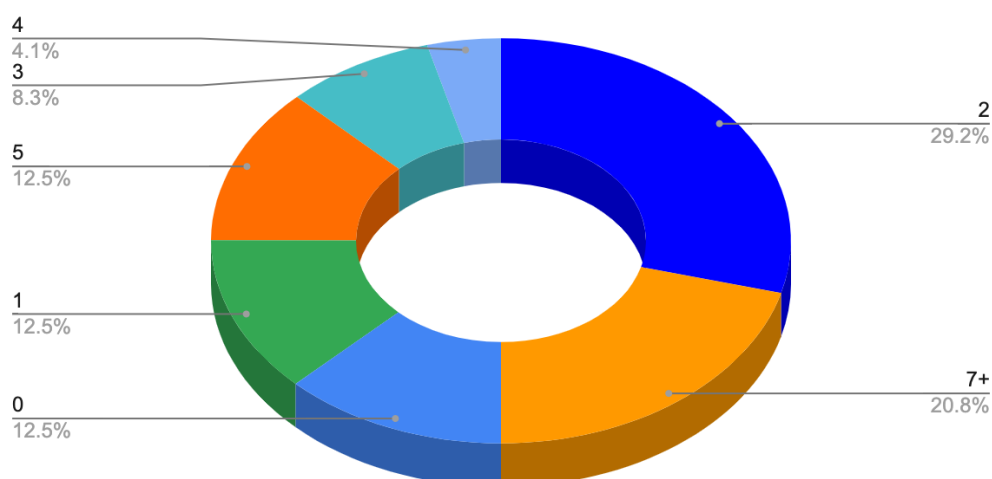
Once restrictions have been lifted it appears that only 54% of Venues will have daily availability, however, it can be seen as a positive that only 6% of respondents have indicated that they will no longer be hiring our their venue.

Q7) What times do you currently have the capacity to hire out your room/hall/space?



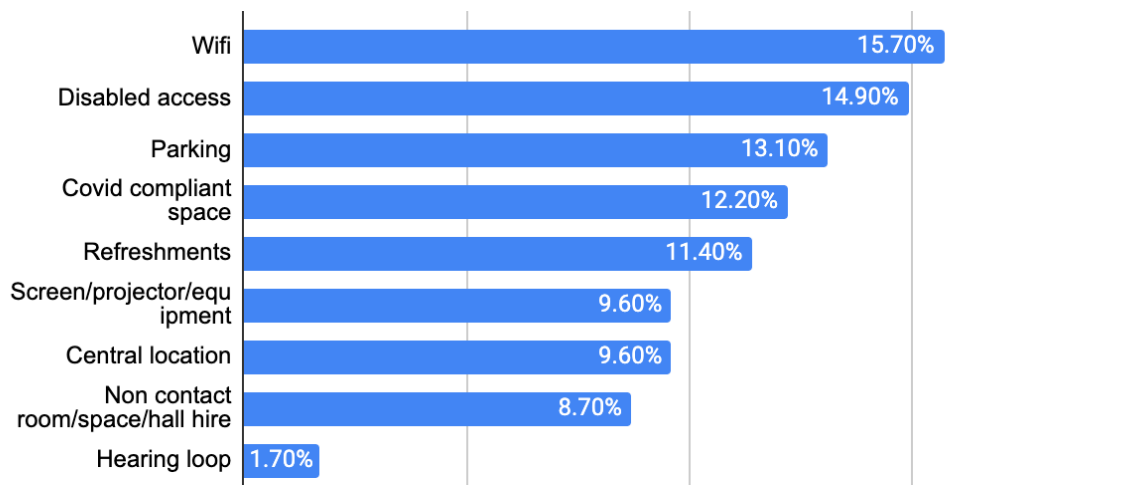
As expected venues are appearing to be very accommodating when discussing reopening which can be seen from the graph above, on average users shouldn't struggle to find a time or day to hire a space (rooms available any time or any day!).

Q8) Looking forward to the roadmap out of Lockdown, how many rooms do you currently have available for hire?



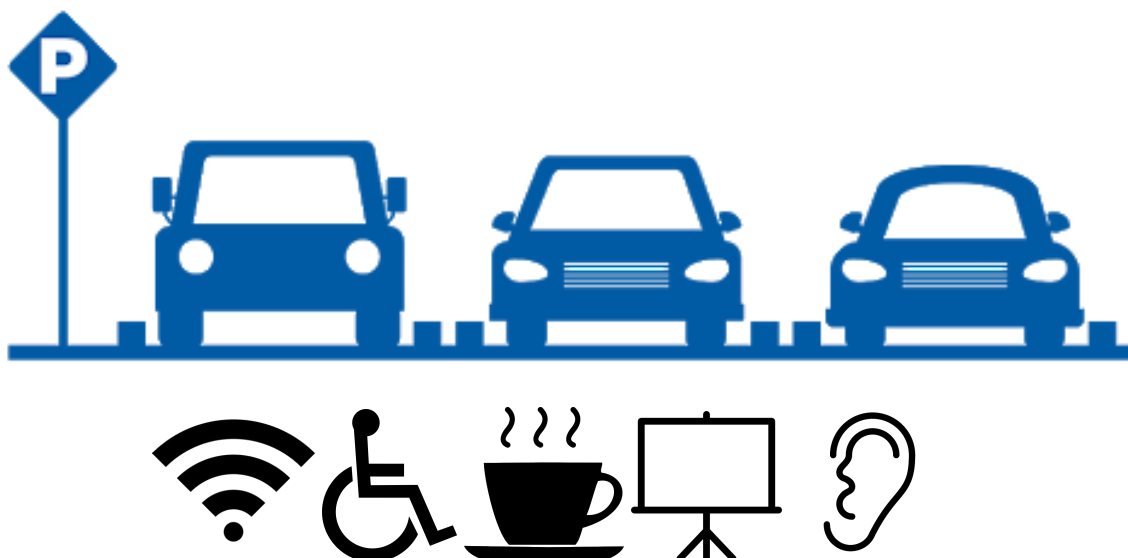
From the respondents that completed our survey, we can see that 29.20% of Venues have at least 2 rooms available, however, 20.80% of Venues in Sittingbourne have over 7 rooms.

Q9) When returning back to hiring out your rooms/spaces/halls what facilities will you have available?

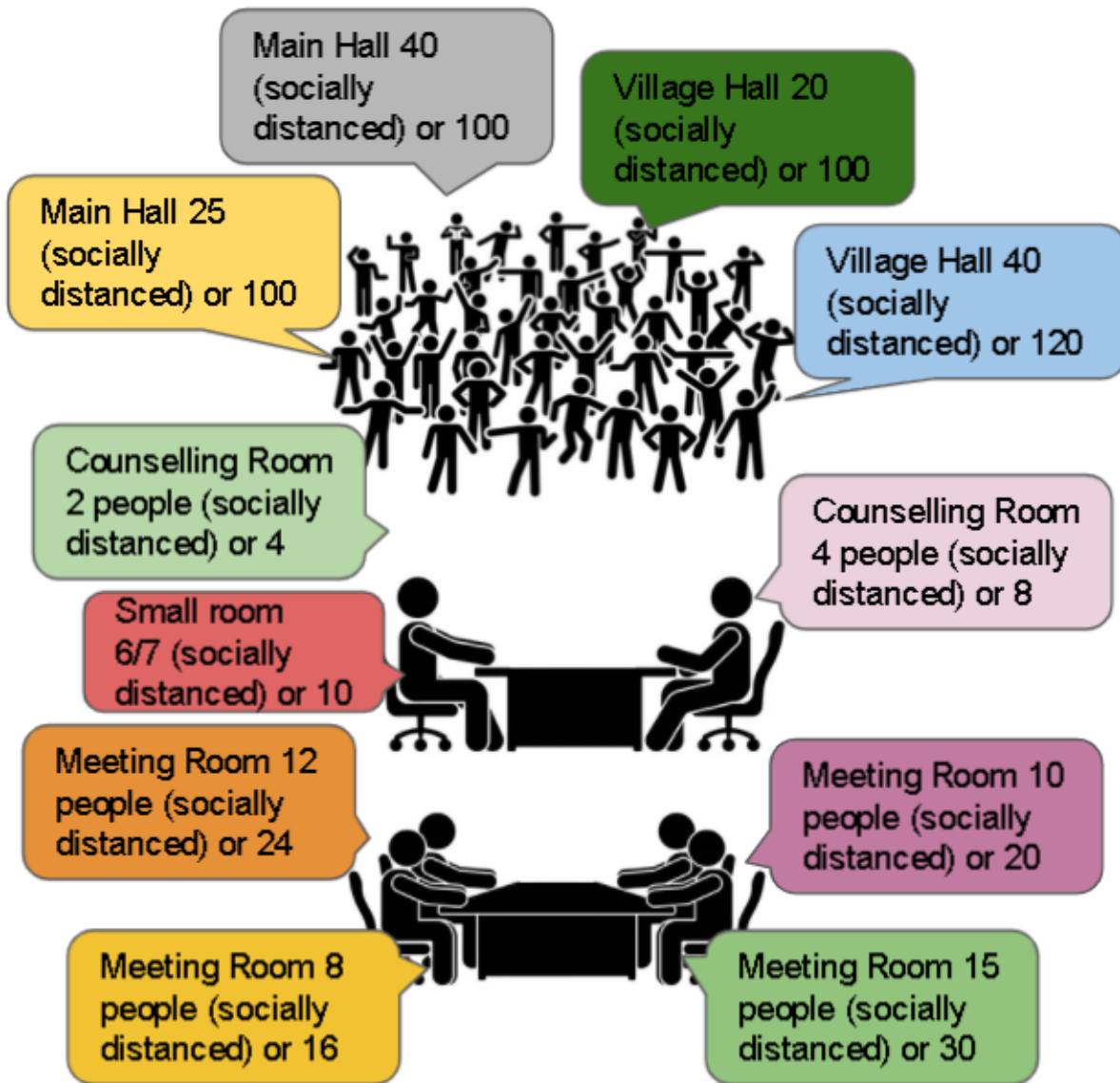


As expected Wifi connection is ranked the highest with almost 16% of Venues offering this, however, this still appears incredibly low in the current climate. One notable point is that less than 15% of respondents from Venues stated that they have disabled access, this is extremely concerning since the latest Strategic Commissioning Analytic Statistical Bulletin stated that 17.6% of residents in Kent have a health problem or disability which limits their day-to-day activities. Even less 1.7% offer a Hearing Loop in their venues.

As parking at Venues was a key concern for hirers it is surprising that it is not more readily available.



Q10) Looking forward to the route map out of lockdown, at this moment in time we would like to find out the maximum capacity of each room including social distancing.



We asked each respondent to tell us to list each of their rooms and let us know their maximum capacity taking social distancing into account. The averages can be found below;

	Meeting Rooms	Small Rooms	Halls
Socially Distanced	12	3	38
Without restrictions	24	6	110

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this section, we present our conclusions based on our research related to the questions presented in our survey,

Impact

It is clear that Venues have particularly struggled during 2020/21 due to the Government restricting what can and can't be delivered because of COVID 19. Almost 60% of our respondents have not hired out a single room in almost 18 months and with the average room, fee equating to about £10.50 an hour, ultimately meaning a lot of revenue that has been lost. The positive is that we only had 6% state that they would no longer be able to hire out rooms, even with these devastating restrictions.

Moving forward

Due to the lack of room hire over the last 12-18 months, our respondents seemed very keen to reopen their doors as soon as possible. 54% of respondents felt that as soon as restrictions are lifted they would be open on a daily basis, however, throughout the whole survey it was clear that Venues would be extremely accommodating moving forward.

Current restrictions

As can be expected Venues are concerned about making sure that their premises are COVID compliant, with the easing of restrictions they felt that following and enforcing Government guidelines was their main priority, however, if you compare this with our User Group survey they believed the ultimate priority was making sure the Venue is safe, clean and has the right procedures in place. With this in mind it important that spaces for hire make this a key priority when beginning to reopen.

Overall to summarise it is very positive for the sector as a whole as people are feeling more confident returning back to delivering and participating in face to face activities after the 21st June 2021. Venues should expect the majority of their bookings to return as almost all the groups that have completed this survey have maintained contact and will resume when it is safe to do so. Even with the advances in technology, it is clear that respondents would prefer to meet in person rather than through a computer screen.

Respondents

Here at Swale CVS, we would like to thank all the respondents that took the time and effort to complete our survey. Your responses will help shape the needs and demand for rooms/spaces/halls for hire in Sittingbourne.



Kemsley Community Centre



Children and Families



GORE COURT CC



Kemsley Community Village Hall

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Bobbing Village Hall

A number of anonymous responses were also received.