

# Sittingbourne Community Hub Capacity and Demand Report

## User Groups

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Conducted by Swale Community and Voluntary  
Services  
May 2021



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## Introduction

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

This report aims to be beneficial in understanding the level of demand and need by user groups 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 users when their 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

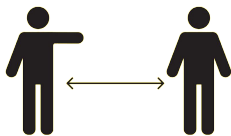


27.6%  
Church/Village  
halls

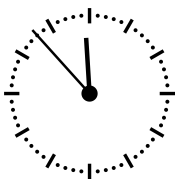


9.5%  
Office Space

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 20 general questions and was designed to capture some of the main opinions about future demands for local spaces 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 demand and needs before COVID 19 starting impacting these users. The second focuses on how these groups have been impacted and finally, the last set explores the possibility of returning after Lockdown restrictions have been lifted.

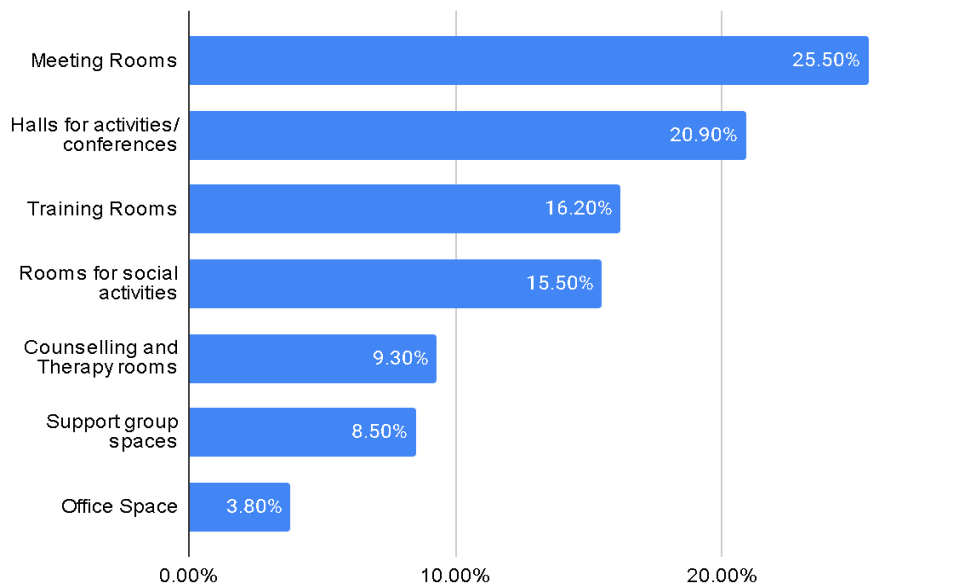
The survey combined open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions with predefined answers offering respondents the possibility to choose and rank among several options or the possibility to grade on a 'not important' to 'very important' scale. For these questions, an optional space was provided 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

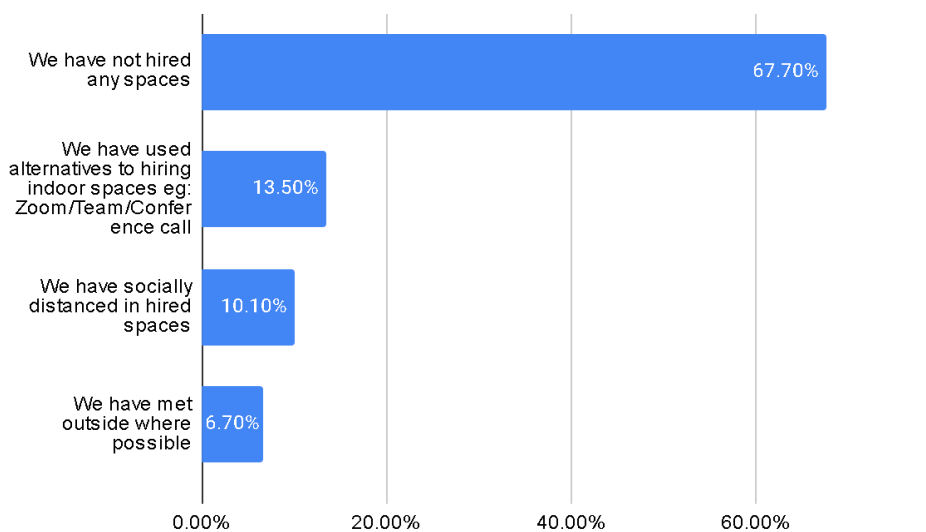
**Q1-Q6. Here are some issues the local area will be facing over the next few months as we move towards Lockdown restrictions easing. These questions explore and allow us to compare pre and post-pandemic use.**

Q1) What type of space for hire have you used prior to Lockdown?



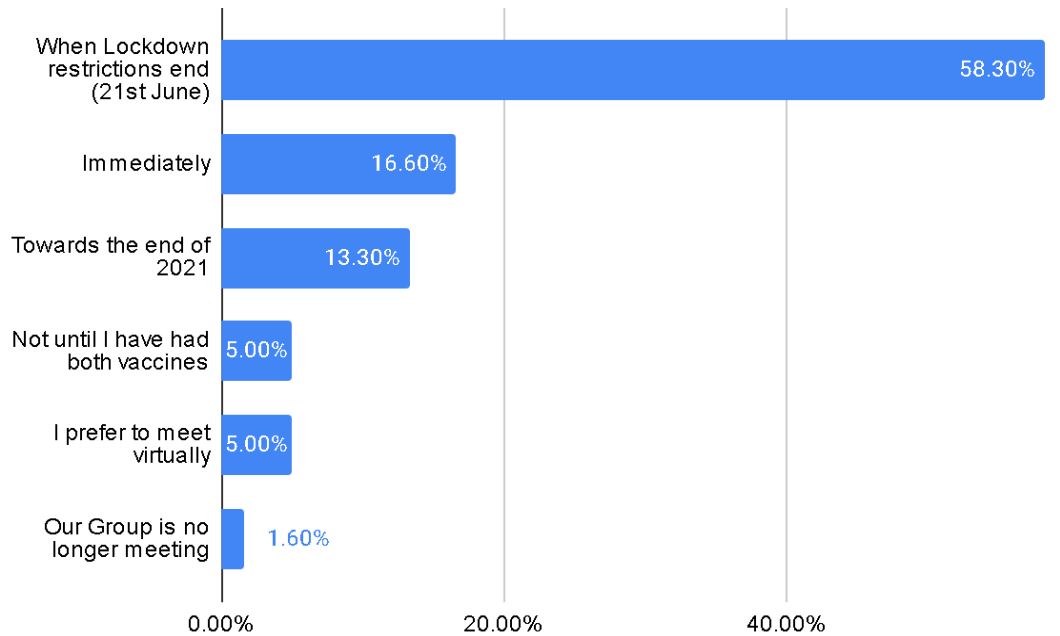
Prior to COVID and Lockdown restrictions over a quarter of all spaces were used for Meeting rooms with only 3.8% were used for Office Spaces.

Q2) What impact has COVID-19 had with regards to spaces for hire that would have been used?



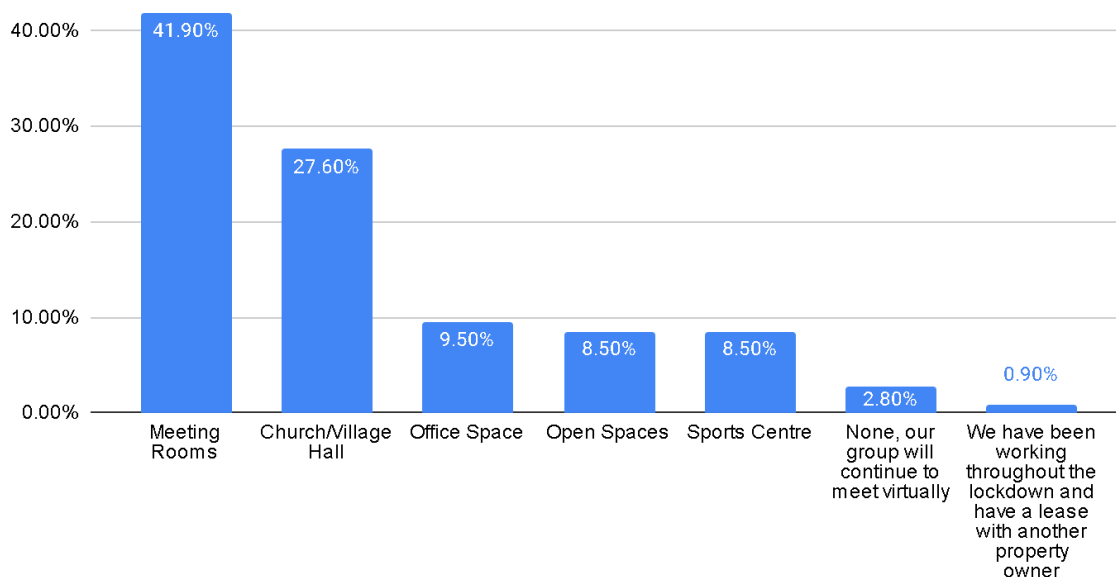
COVID-19 has had a huge impact on hiring halls with 67.70% of users not booking any spaces during this period. The average price of hiring a space in Sittingbourne is £10.75 per hour per room for Community Groups, meaning that the sector as a whole has lost substantial revenue.

Q3) At what point would you feel comfortable in attending spaces/rooms/hall hire again?



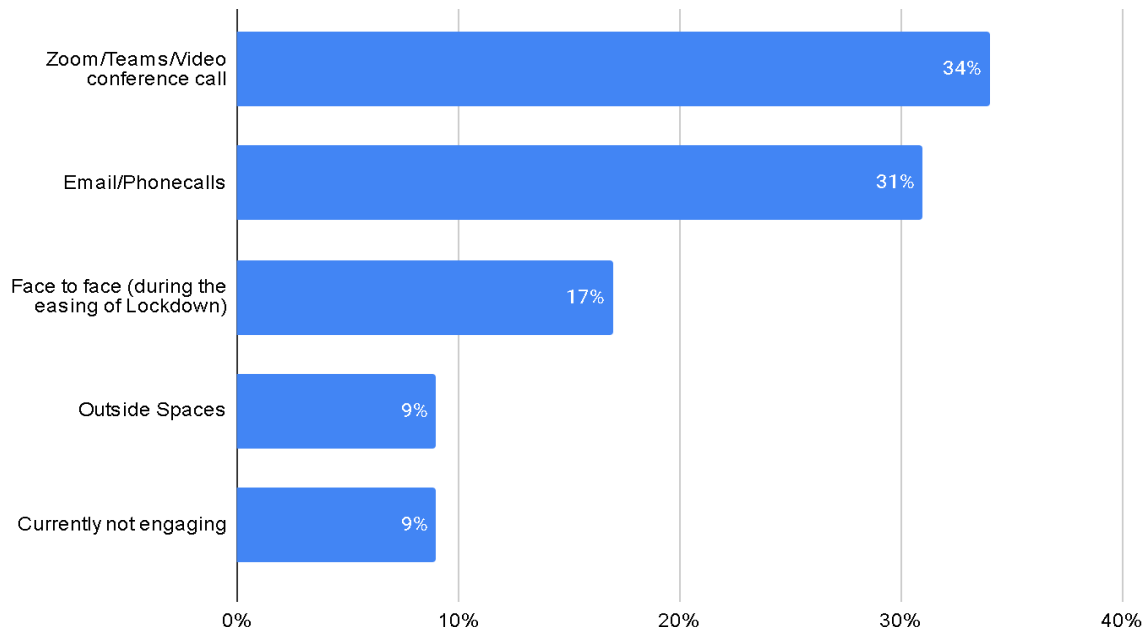
It would appear that the vast majority of hirers either immediately or when the current lockdown restrictions are lifted want to go back to face to face engagement. This is hugely encouraging for halls/spaces that have the capacity to hire out their venue.

Q4) Once restrictions are lifted what sort of spaces would you be interested in using?



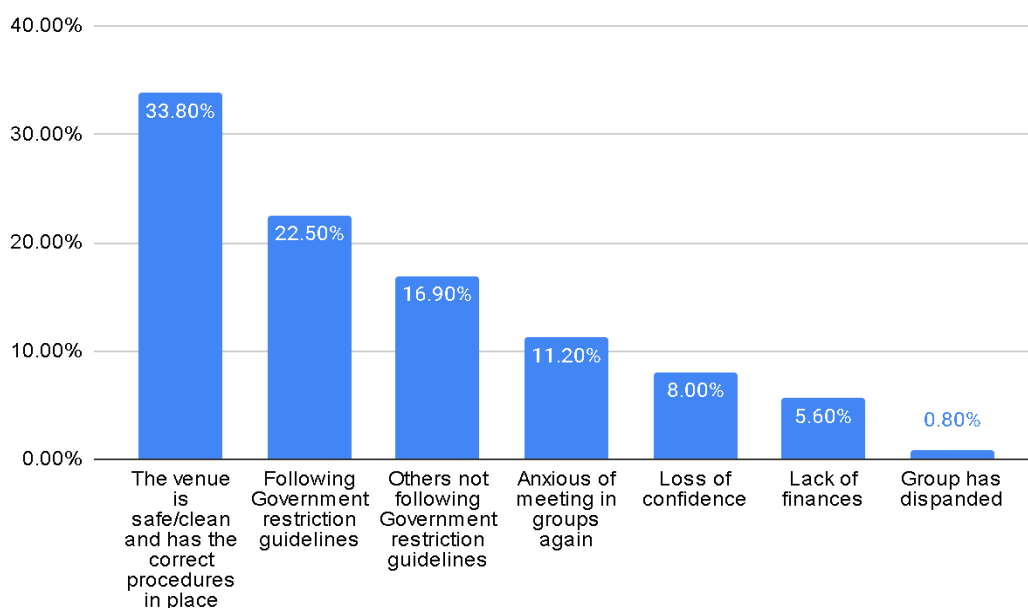
Once restrictions have been lifted it appears the most popular spaces/room for hire are predictably meetings rooms and halls for activities accounting for over 80% of the demand.

Q5) During Lockdown what spaces/technology has your group used or are currently using?



As might be expected the use of technology has been instrumental in allowing hirers to stay connected during the restrictions with 65% of them using zoom, teams, email and phone calls. One might have thought with so many using technology there would be less demand to resume face to face engagement, however, if you compare this to question 3 you can see that 75% of users do wish to return.

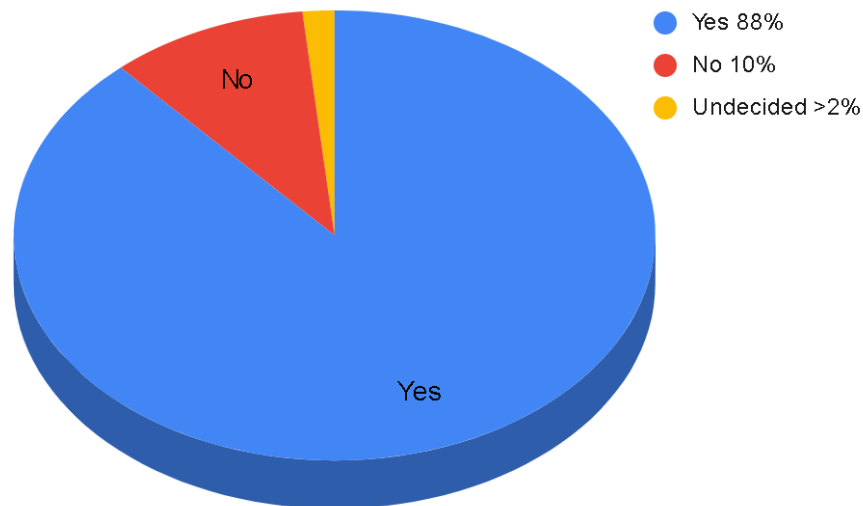
Q6) What are your main concerns about attending activities in hired spaces again?





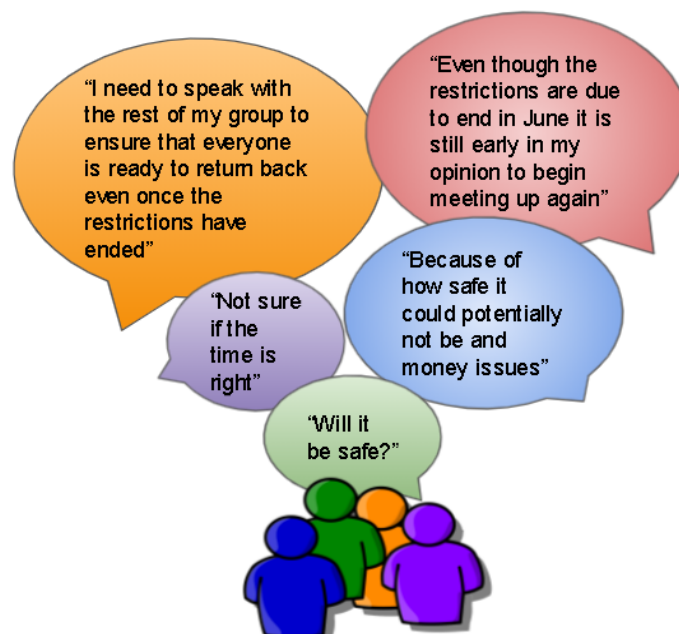
The main concerns are the venue is clean, safe and has the correct procedures in place to reduce any possible risk. Although, 39% of users are concerned about Government restrictions and whether or not others will follow the guidelines.

**Q7-Q9. These questions explore and allow us to compare pre and post-pandemic needs and demand with regards to hiring space again in the future once Lockdown restrictions end.**

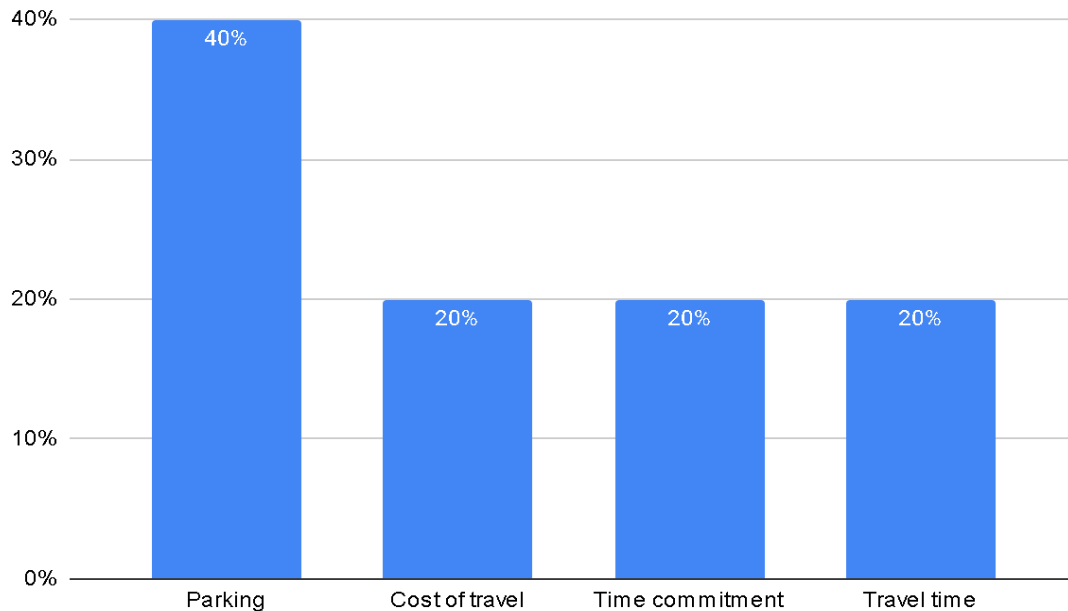


It is very clear that hirers want to return to venues and meet face to face once lockdown restrictions end with 88% of respondents telling us an emphatic yes!

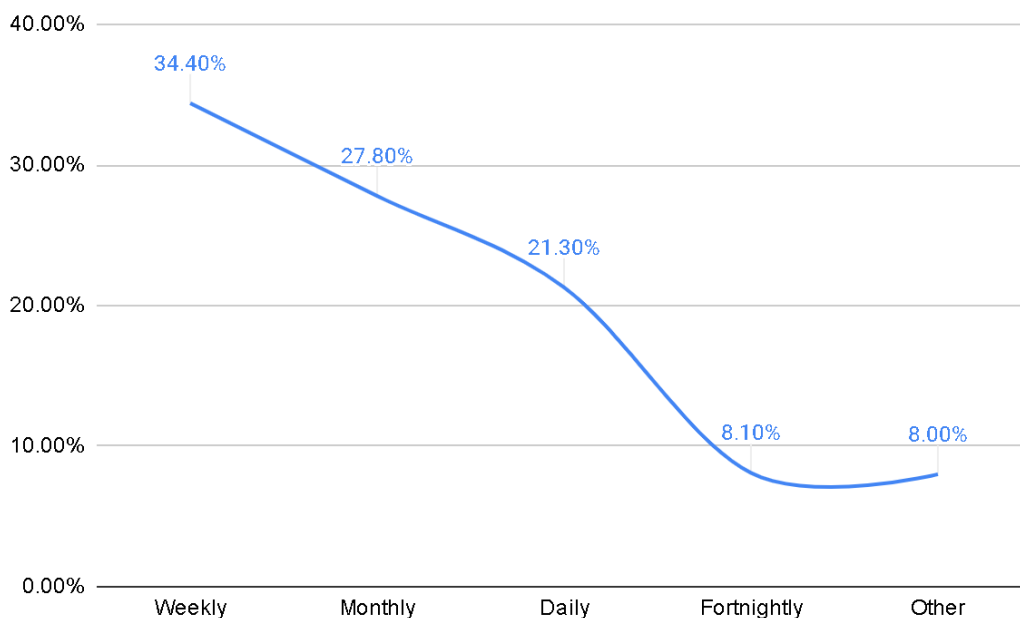
Q7) Will you continue to meet in hired spaces once it is safe to do so? We followed up this question and explored the rationale of why some users might be undecided and here are a sample of their responses;



For those that answered 'No' we discovered that the main reason for no longer wanting to use hired spaces was Parking (40%) with the Cost of Travel, Time commitment and Travel time being 20% respectfully.

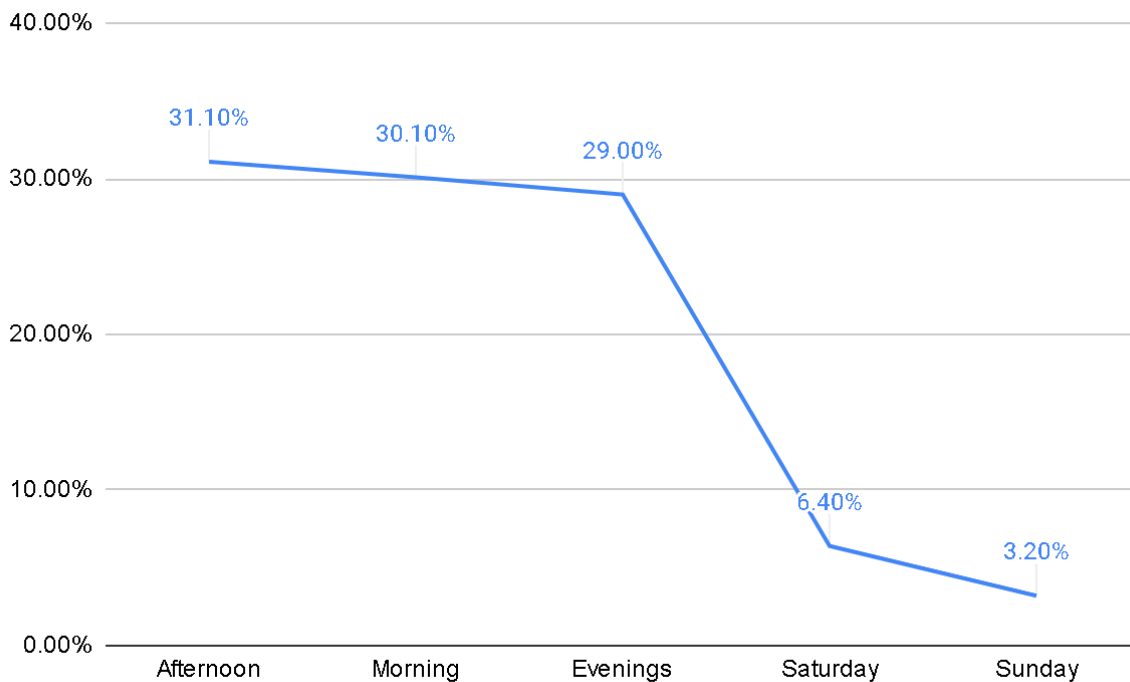


Q10) For those that were interested in returning we asked how often would you be interested in hiring these spaces?



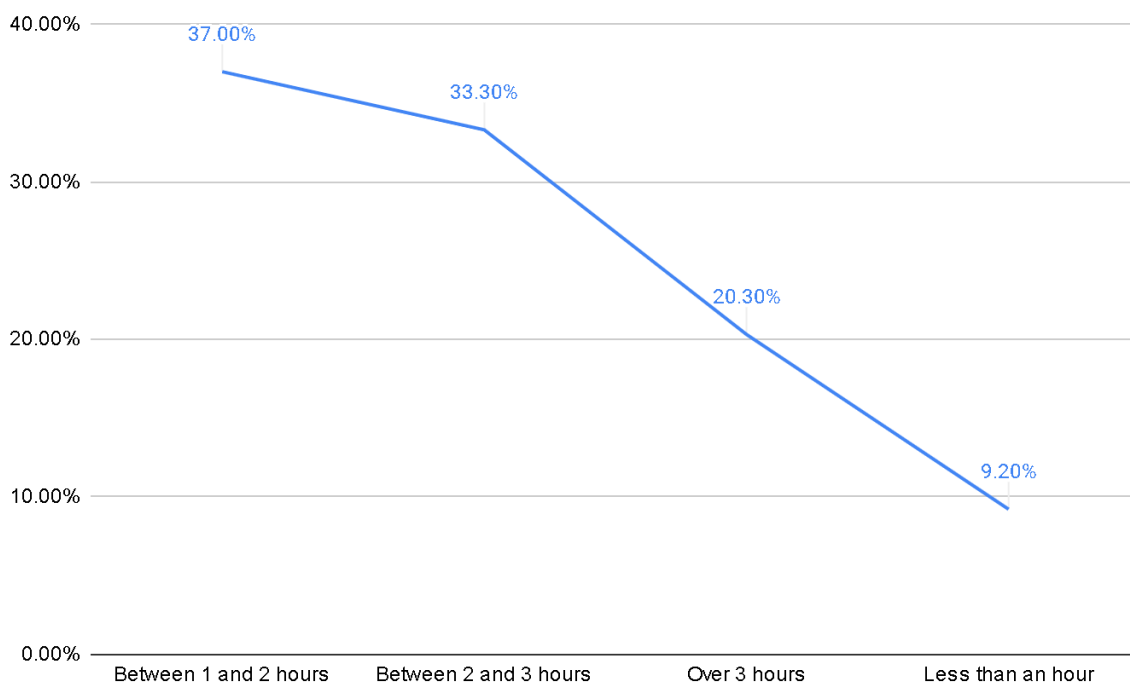
As expected the general demand is split across the requirement of the individual group, however, generally groups in Sittingbourne meet on a weekly/monthly basis which equates to over 60% of respondent comments.

Q11) What times will you require hiring spaces/rooms/halls? (tick all that apply)



When it comes down to specifics, a notable point is that demand at weekends made up less than 10% of the responses, with afternoons, mornings and evenings averaging out at 30% across the whole duration of the day.

Q11) What length of time will you require spaces/rooms/halls in the future?



Focusing more on once the groups have booked a venue the main level of demand is for rooms/spaces that can provide 1-2 hours slots with only 9% needing less than one hour.

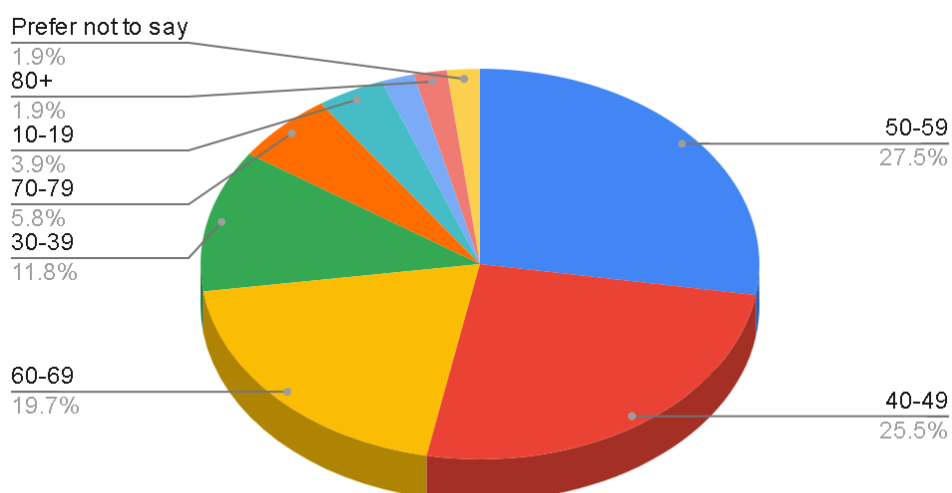
**Q12-Q17. Here the survey explores some of the issues facing the entire area. We asked how big of a priority each issue should be. Should it be an extremely high priority, a middle or an extremely low priority for each user group?**

	Extremely Important	Important	Not Important
Socially Distancing Encouraged	74%	15%	11%
Socially Distancing (enforced)	74%	15%	11%
Masks available upon request	58%	27%	15%
Masks required (enforced)	52%	23%	13%
Hand Sanitiser available	63%	20%	12%
COVID practise information (venue)	68%	22%	8%
Temperature Checks (enforced)	46%	27%	27%

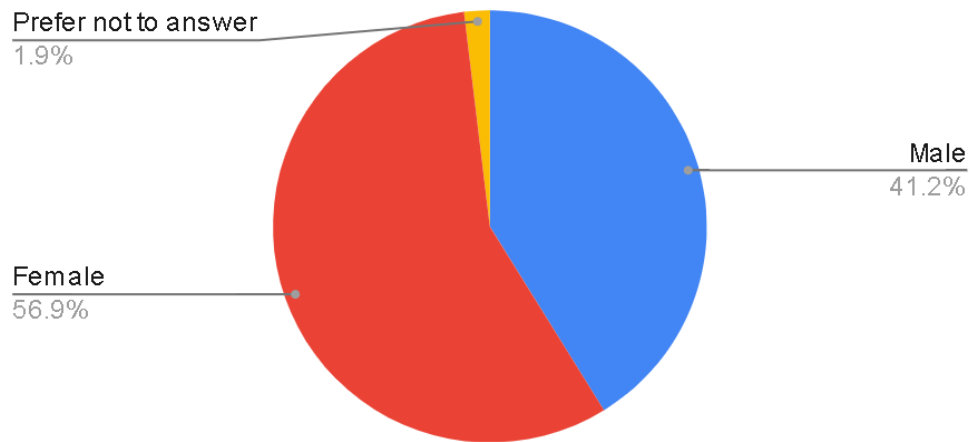
From the information above we can see that User groups find that Socially Distancing encouraged and enforced is extremely important (74%). Venues should make this a priority when planning on reopening their services. However, Temperature checks are considered by the majority as not extremely important.

**Questions 18 onwards specified the demographic of the individual completing this survey and those results can be found below:**

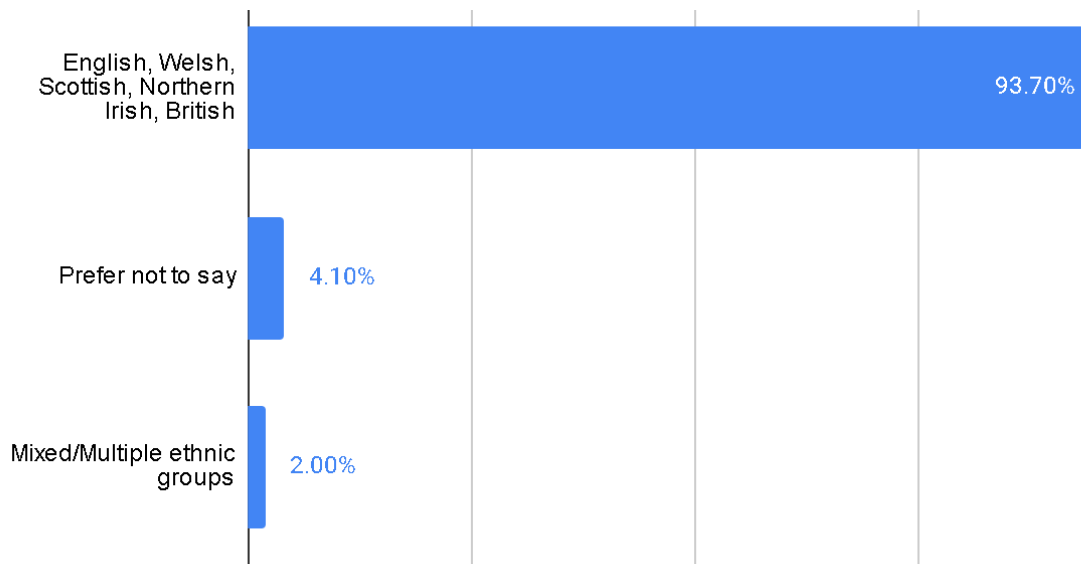
Q18) What is your age range? (optional)



Q19) What is your gender? (optional)



Q18) What is your Ethnicity (optional)



In the first block of questions, in addition to providing their age, respondents were asked to indicate their gender and their ethnicity.

As shown in the graphs above, the majority of respondents were between 50-59 years old which accounted for 27.5% of the sample. 56.9% were female with 93.70% of respondents being from an English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British background.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

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

### Concerns about returning

On the basis of our research, we can see that respondents are very keen to return back to face to face engagements with a huge 88% wanting to meet back immediately or once the current Lockdown restrictions have lifted. However, this will only occur if they believe the Venue is safe, clean and has the correct procedures in place. Ultimately it appears very positive for the sector with engagement levels appearing to maintain at a high level and venues should be ready for a large proportion of their clients returning.

### Meeting during a Pandemic

Based on our immediate findings it is clear that most groups have managed to maintain some level of engagement throughout Lockdown with 65% using a variety of different virtual calling tools, although 9% of respondents did state that they're not currently engaging at all. Interesting even though almost 10% of groups have not engaged only 0.8% of respondents that completed this survey have disbanded. Overall groups have been forced to maintain contact across different platforms and methods, however, want to return back to normality as soon as possible.

### Future engagement

For those groups that no longer wish to meet in person (10%), it appears that this is due to a variety of different issues with the main reason for no longer wanting to return back to hiring is because of Parking 40% which is slightly surprising as on average a parking spot in Sittingbourne is £1 per hour, therefore you can infer that these parking zones are just not convenient for these groups. Cost of travel (20%), the time commitment (20%) and travel time (20%) all were equally represented with respondents stating that a combination of all these reasons made using online tools more viable for their organisation.

In terms of those wanting to return according to our research, groups would like to meet on a weekly basis (34%), mainly on weekdays (90%) and for around 1-3 hours (70%).



## Government restrictions

Even though we are moving towards the end of lockdown restrictions it is extremely important for users to feel that Social Distancing is encouraged and enforced 74%, more research needs to be conducted as we move towards the 21st June 2021. Although it was clear that temperature checks were considered the least important out of all the guidelines recommended by the Government to the respondents that answered our survey.

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. 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.



relate  
the relationship people

Rotary



THE  
TRANSPORT  
SERVICE

COMPANIONSHIP  
AT CHRISTMAS

Companionship at Christmas provides an invaluable service to those who would otherwise be spending Christmas alone.



The Geese Project  
SUPPORTING YOUR WELL-BEING

HOME  
START

Sittingbourne  
& Sheppey

Oare String Orchestra

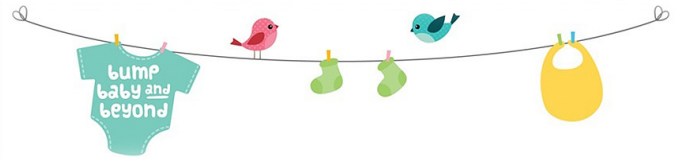
@oarestringorchestra · Orchestra







New Connections Befriending Scheme



CROSSROADS  
CARE KENT

Pieceful Patchers



A number of anonymous responses were also received.