

Making a difference

in rural communities throughout England

2013-14 annual report on Defra's investment in the ACRE Network



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

acre | ACTION WITH
COMMUNITIES
IN RURAL ENGLAND

Contents

Foreword from Defra	2
Executive summary	3
Introduction	6
Priorities and activity.....	6
How the funding is spent.....	7
Rural Economy	8
Broadband	11
Rural Services	14
Rural Transport	17
Community Energy Schemes and Fuel Poverty	20
Affordable Housing and Planning	23
Appendix A – Governance and Grant Allocations	26
Appendix B – Grants to ACRE Members.....	27

Action with Communities in Rural England is the national umbrella body for the 38 charitable local development agencies who make up the ACRE Network. Our vision is to champion vibrant, sustainable, inclusive and diverse rural communities by working in partnership with our members.

Foreword from Defra

I welcome this annual report which shows the local benefits flowing from Defra's investment in the ACRE Network across rural England during 2013/14. The network has continued to focus on the important areas of broadband, the rural economy, rural transport, access to services, energy and affordable housing which underpin thriving rural communities. We are pleased that the network has been successful in securing additional funding from a range of other local and national sources, delivering significant benefits to rural communities this year. Important outcomes delivered for rural communities on the ground to highlight include:

Broadband: work in the Tees Valley to help local communities access over £1 million from the Rural Community Broadband fund enabling 3,500 more homes and businesses in remoter rural areas access faster broadband services. Across Shropshire digital skills support has helped 500 people in isolated rural communities improve their IT skills so they can realise the benefits of faster broadband and get on line.

Rural economy: work across Herefordshire and Worcestershire has provided vital business support to social and community enterprises helping them to secure local jobs and become financially sustainable.

Community transport/services: across Wiltshire hundreds of volunteers participating in link schemes have helped rural people get to important GP or hospital appointments and do everyday tasks such as the shopping or tidying up the garden. In the past 12 months these volunteers have provided support amounting to an economic value of just under £1million.

Energy: new oil buying schemes have been set up to help rural people without access to the gas grid save money on energy bills. Estimated savings of £649,000 have been delivered for members across 25 schemes in different rural locations.

We look forward to working with the ACRE Network to build and expand on these outcomes during 2014/15 which is the final year of the four year partnership agreement set up in 2010/11.

Sara Eppel

Head of Rural Communities Policy, Defra

Executive summary

Defra funding for ACRE and its members during 2013/14 totalled £2.25m. This investment has enabled a further £12.5m to be levered in from a range of local and national sources, delivering significant additional benefits to rural communities.

ACRE members (Rural Community Councils - RCCs) have engaged with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in the development of Strategic Economic Plans (SEPs) and also their European Strategic Investment Fund (ESIF) strategies. RCCs have influenced LEP strategies and funding plans to take in to account the needs of rural communities.

RCCs have worked to support rural businesses by providing advice to both business and social enterprises and also by offering office space and business services. This intervention has helped many rural businesses to grow and be more resilient.

RCC involvement in the LEADER England programme has helped to increase its success. In some LEADER groups RCCs have key strategic and decision making roles that have helped drive development and delivery of the programme. RCCs have used this knowledge and specialist experience of rural European funding to help LEPs, local partners and Defra to shape significant plans for European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

Rural Community Councils champion rural broadband and Digital by Default

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for broadband activity was £226,357, enabling an additional £502,955 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources.

In some areas, RCCs have been working on embedding 'digital by default' by providing digital training and awareness raising of broadband roll out opportunities with key rural stakeholders and communities.

In the Tees Valley area RCC support for a Rural Communities Broadband Fund project has resulted in some 3,500 more homes and businesses benefitting from broadband access.

Rural services delivered, and funding and strategies influenced, to meet rural needs

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for rural services activity was £526,688, enabling an additional £5,131,461 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources.

Some RCCs have worked with local Clinical Commissioning Groups, influencing thinking about rural health services and helping to provide consultation services with rural communities to inform the development of planning health services. In some localities RCC experience and innovation has led to the development of a range of schemes that provide frontline support to help improve people's access to services, such as Community Agents and the Village Care Programme.

In some areas RCCs have pioneered the development and delivery of local Healthwatch services in rural communities; five RCCs now act as the host organisation for these important consumer forums.

ACRE and the RCCs are helping to make it easier for village halls to operate by supporting management committees changing to the new legal structure, a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Rural transport provided to support the economy and to improve wellbeing

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for rural transport activity was £229,708, enabling an additional £1,786,612 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources.

RCCs have worked closely with local authorities to improve transport and accessibility to services for rural communities. A key success has been the development of improved transport hubs in 18 areas. Some RCCs also provide frontline rural transport services including car share schemes, enabling thousands of rural people to travel who would otherwise be unable. Ten RCCs run community transport schemes with a typical number of volunteers per RCC scheme of 30 to 50 people. The total number of passenger journeys supported by these schemes was over 258,000.

Community Energy Schemes saving money and reducing fuel poverty

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for community energy and fuel poverty activity was £300,008, enabling an additional £1,047,778 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources.

25 members of the ACRE Network run community oil-buying schemes, collectively purchasing more than seven million litres of heating oil each year on behalf of rural customers. This amounted to a total estimated saving of £649,000 across all the schemes.

Some of our members have been carrying out energy audits on community buildings to help the committees upgrade their properties and access grant funding. We expect 75% of the recommendations to be implemented or planned to be implemented in the near future.

Affordable housing built and Local Plans supporting further provision

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for affordable housing and planning activity was £387,581, enabling an additional £2,130,129 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources.

Our Network has worked with local authorities to ensure Local Plans for housing are rural proofed and campaigned on behalf of rural residents. Traditional 'rural housing enabling' work is still ongoing in 16 RCCs, focusing on raising awareness of the challenges that rural communities face in accessing affordable housing. The greatest shift in this housing support has been the development of Community Land Trust (CLT) support projects. Seven RCCs are developing CLT umbrellas and providing dedicated support for community housing initiatives.

At the end of March 2014, there were 135 'rural exception schemes', comprising 1,559 units of housing either with planning permission or awaiting a planning decision that had been supported by RCC involvement.

Introduction

This Annual Review for sets out the outcomes and impact of Defra's £2.25m funding for the ACRE Network during 2013/14.

Defra's investment has supported the ACRE Network to deliver in three key areas:

- Helping to ensure the rural voice is heard in local and national decision-making;
- Providing direct support for community action; and
- Providing intelligence, at national and local level, on the impact of policy in rural areas and best practice examples of community led solutions to local challenges.

Rural communities have a long history of being innovative and resilient. A sense of community and belonging are at the heart of these communities and this is something that lends itself well to a community taking responsibility and action to achieve better outcomes for its residents.

During 2013/14 Defra has produced updated toolkits and guidance to assist with the rural proofing of policy development at both central and local levels. This has been welcomed by ACRE and its members.

ACRE and its members have continued to represent grassroots rural communities and have been part of a number of national and local partnerships and steering groups to assist in the development of new Localism Rights and rural proofing methods.

Priorities and activity

During 2013/14, Defra's funding was shaped to be flexible and provide support for local influencing, community action and intelligence gathering across a number of key priorities facing rural communities including:

- the rural economy
- broadband
- rural services
- rural transport
- community energy generation and fuel poverty
- affordable housing and planning

The overarching objectives of Defra's funding for the ACRE Network were to deliver the following:

- Local strategic influencing (RCC engagement with Local Authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and other key local partnerships) to ensure that local decision-making sufficiently takes on board rural needs.
- Stimulating local activity, knowledge and understanding on the top Defra priorities of demand stimulation for broadband infrastructure and influencing the drivers for rural economic growth.
- Sharing best practice and local intelligence with government on new ways of delivering services and community-led activities, particularly in the areas of: rural

transport, rural services, community energy schemes, rural affordable housing and community engagement in planning.

- Sharing grassroots rural community intelligence, knowledge and feedback with Defra through the ACRE topic-based expert reference groups, 6 monthly intelligence reports and special question reports/feedback.

How the funding is spent

Defra funding for ACRE and its members during 2013/14 totalled £2.25m. Over 96 per cent of the funding is released to ACRE members who deliver the local activity and are governed by a rigorous framework of reporting and accountability. This investment has enabled a further £12.5m to be levered in from a range of local and national sources, delivering significant additional benefits to rural communities. The detail of the allocations to each of the ACRE members is set out in Appendix B.

Theme	Defra spend (£)	Overall spend (£)
Rural economy	489,656	1,873,860
Broadband	226,357	502,955
Rural services	526,688	5,131,461
Rural transport	229,708	1,786,612
Community energy & fuel poverty	300,008	1,047,778
Affordable housing & neighbourhood planning	387,581	2,130,129

Rural Economy

Stimulating economic growth is the top priority for Government, and enabling rural areas to contribute to and benefit from that growth is key to sustainable and vibrant rural communities.

The investment from Defra for 2013/14, in the ACRE Network for rural economy activity, was £489,656, enabling an additional £1,873,860 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources; delivering further benefits to rural communities.

What the Network set out to achieve:

- To develop influencing strategies to increase strategic engagement with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), including being familiar with the Local LEP business plan and its priorities.
- Through engagement with LEPs, help to raise awareness and understanding of the evidence and positive examples where the rural economy can contribute to delivering the LEP goals.
- Provide intelligence and feedback to Defra on how LEPs are addressing rural issues within their overall strategies, highlighting best practice and any barriers/key gaps.
- Provide intelligence and feedback on other local solutions and drivers of rural economic growth, including best practice examples and case studies (e.g. rural job clubs, enterprise groups, business start up support, apprenticeships, skills, training and workforce development etc.).

Key outcomes delivered

Local Enterprise Partnerships - helping to ensure that rural issues are identified in LEP strategies

Some ACRE members have engaged with LEPs in the development of their Strategic Economic Plans (SEPs) and also their European Strategic Investment Fund (ESIF) Strategies (four ACRE members have taken up seats on a LEP Board and nine take the rural lead). Where RCCs are involved directly within LEP mechanisms, then rural priorities identified by the ACRE Network do appear within SEP and/or ESIF strategies.

Identifying Rural Issues in LEP Strategies - key examples of successful impact:

- **Action in Rural Sussex** - Development of support for a Community Land Trust initiative for affordable housing, small-scale workspace and green infrastructure. This involved developing a co-funding model for the development of the affordable housing that involves a holistic approach to economic development that includes local government through a robust governance structure.
- **Tees Valley RCC** has written a Rural Economic Strategy as part of the EU structural funds bid process. Several areas of the strategy have been included within the Tees Valley Local Enterprise Partnership's submission to government.

Making sure that rural businesses have the support they need

Some ACRE members have worked to support rural businesses by providing advice to both business and social enterprises and also by offering office space and business services. Some members provide access to specialist premises and infrastructure (e.g. broadband) and businesses have found it easier to operate in rural locations where access to this type of provision is not always available. In some localities, ACRE members have helped rural businesses to become more efficient and effective by providing training, including the use of social media and energy saving methods. Business growth and resilience has increased where these interventions have taken place.

Rural Business Support - key examples of successful impact:

- **Norfolk RCC** provides office facilities to five enterprises and runs a business network called Done Different which includes referrals, training and support opportunities for a range of rural businesses. Done Different has trained 23 businesses on the use of social media, five businesses have been trained on their electrical safety responsibilities and how to save energy and six businesses have been given training on accessing grants and support. Estimated new business generated between members from November – March 2014 is £10,000.
- **Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire's** Outreach Business Coach has provided one to one pre-start, start up and post start support to social and community enterprises. This support includes business planning, funding and finance advice specifically in relation to Defra Community Buildings loans, Community Share offers and Crowdfunding. The work has also included business rates appeals and support with staffing and employment issues. Business support was given to 18 organisations attracting social investment finance and the localism Community Rights were used to secure assets. This created four new jobs and secured ten existing jobs through increasing income from trading activity.

Involvement in LEADER and Local Action Groups (LAGs)

Working within an operational context, set partly by the Local Enterprise Partnerships, are LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs). 91 prospective LEADER groups have been offered funding to help prepare an application for LEADER in the next RDP. The 27 new partnerships are not yet approved as LAGs, and neither are the 64 existing LAGs. All are competing for funding from 2015 and this is currently a transition year. ACRE Network members are involved in 56 LAGs – and either hosts an existing LAG, or in 11 cases, is the lead for the development of a new group (e.g. Kent RCC, Tees Valley RCC and West of England Rural Network).

Several ACRE members indicate that their work, or partnerships they are involved with, have helped ensure that LEADER is 'hard wired' in to some European Strategic Investment Fund strategies being developed by LEPs.

Involvement in LEADER and LAG groups - key examples of successful impact:

- **Northants ACRE** were involved with one of the most highly regarded and successful Local Action Groups in the country. The close working relationship between the Local Action Group, the LEP and Northamptonshire ACRE as the accountable body, has been recognised nationally as a particularly successful format that helped to formulate strategic priorities on a broad basis.

Cambridgeshire ACRE managed The Fens Adventurers Local Action Group, a partnership of local entrepreneurs and professionals representing interests in farming, rural business, and tourism, as well as other specialties relevant to the Cambridgeshire and West Norfolk Fens. The Fens Adventurers LAG was successful in obtaining £4m of Rural Development Programme for England funding to deliver a Local Development Strategy from 2009-13 within a defined geographic area in the Cambridgeshire and West Norfolk Fens. The LAG has invested £2.57m in 66 initiatives, leveraging an additional £4.8m of private finance into the locality during the lifespan of the programme.

Cambridgeshire ACRE is leading a bid for further funding under RDPE, which is jointly funded by the European Agricultural Fund and Defra. If successful, this would bring around £2m of grant funding into the area for investment into local land-based industries, micro or small businesses, rural services, tourism, cultural and heritage activities.

Case study

- **Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK)** has a strong jobs and growth focus to its work. During 2013/14 ACRK undertook work to create or sustain 216 jobs directly and a further 693 indirectly. It worked with 218 enterprises - both for profit businesses and social enterprises, ranging from village shops to community-owned buildings.

The jobs and growth work of ACRK is focused on provision of guidance, training, technical support and networking opportunities - and includes help to create appropriate governing structures for local enterprise as well as help in finding investment. Some of this activity comes through the operation of a European Social Fund Community Grants programme (sub-contracted from another ACRE Network member, Surrey Community Action), and a specific rural retailers support programme co-financed principally by Kent County Council. However, general community and enterprise development also supports a flexible range of entrepreneurship.

One example is work undertaken with a wood processing enterprise called Growth Rings, currently based on Romney Marsh. Growth Rings evolved into a Community Interest Company with help from ACRK, and has since secured Job Centre Plus investment to underpin a new programme of activity with young people.

Broadband

Having access to reliable fast broadband services is vital for rural communities to stay connected and realise their economic growth potential. Delivering superfast broadband to rural communities is a key Government priority. The £780m superfast rollout programme is on track to give access to 95% of UK premises by 2017, the remainder having access to a minimum of at least two megabits a second (Mbps). A £10 million competitive fund is also supporting supplier-led bids for innovative solutions to explore how superfast broadband can be delivered in the final hard to reach rural areas.

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for Broadband activity was £226,357, enabling an additional £502,955 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources, delivering further benefits to rural communities.

What the Network set out to achieve:

- To engage at a strategic level with local authorities and broadband partnerships on the roll out of superfast broadband providing expertise on rural community engagement and helping to promote and engage communities and businesses in local demand stimulation initiatives.
- Promote awareness of the benefits of superfast broadband and improved mobile telecommunications to rural communities and businesses.
- Continue to promote the Rural Community Broadband Fund and help communities interested in applying.
- Signpost individual communities towards sources of support to develop broadband solutions, and where capacity exists, provide support to develop and negotiate local community-based solutions.
- Provide feedback and intelligence to Defra on progress with local broadband rollout programmes – flagging up any local barriers to progress and highlighting success factors, best practice and local solutions.
- Provide grass roots intelligence on community-led broadband initiatives, solutions and case studies on the benefits to communities and businesses of faster broadband and improved telecommunications.

Engaging with Broadband Partnerships:

- Despite continued efforts, ACRE members have not, in general, been able to fully engage with local Broadband Partnerships for the delivery of the main BDUK rural broadband programme. This is because the main relationships are of a commercial nature between the Local Authority client and the contractor which has in most cases left limited room for wider partnership working.
- Eight ACRE members have continued to engage with the Broadband Partnerships either on an advisory Board or in formal stakeholder roles. However, they report that their impact has been limited as the project moves to a delivery phase.

Key outcomes delivered:

Strategic engagement

RCCs engagement with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) investment in Superfast broadband

Generally, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have increased their stated ambitions and understanding of Superfast broadband, or lack of, as a barrier to growth. The number of Strategic Investment Fund proposals and Strategic Economic Plans, where this understanding has been specifically referenced, has increased over the previous six months.

Since we last surveyed our Network in 2013, the allocation of the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) has been notified to LEPs. Of the 30 LEPs that RCCs are working with, 24 have identified broadband as an important priority and have allocated resources to addressing the market failures for businesses. ACRE members continue to promote the importance to rural business and communities in general of access to Superfast broadband.

Stimulating demand for broadband services

Five ACRE Network members have continued to work in their local area through a 'Community Champions' programme to increase sign-up and local demand for broadband services. Some members have been working on embedding rural 'digital by default', by providing digital training and awareness raising of broadband roll out opportunities with key rural stakeholders and communities. Local demand stimulation activity is essential to ensure rural communities and businesses gain maximum benefit from the rollout of superfast broadband.

Stimulating demand for broadband services - key examples of successful impact:

- **Cheshire Community Action** promoted the Cheshire and Warrington Broadband Plan to help stimulate demand in rural areas. They identified gaps in support for people who do not use the internet but would like to, or 'need' to, in order to maintain or enhance their quality of life and have followed up by providing support to these people via Community Agents. The Community Agents have been using drop in sessions to provide basic and practical computer skills relating to job applications and welfare support. This is helping to ensure the benefits of faster broadband are realised by people on the ground.
- **Community Lincs** created and maintained two web sites, one for community broadband champions www.lincsbroadbandchamps.co.uk which at its peak had 60 Champions. They also helped to train and encourage over 80 people to go online through www.lincsmemories.org
- **Cambridgeshire ACRE** and Cambridgeshire County Council's Connecting Cambridgeshire Team worked together to develop a strategy for Parish Councils regarding communicating take-up and rollout of the BDUK programme.

- The **Community Council for Shropshire** won the NIACE Digital Practitioner of the Year in recognition of the work delivered by their Get Shropshire Online project and has supported over 500 people in isolated rural communities to develop digital skills.

Supporting uptake of the Rural Community Broadband Fund (RCBF)

All 37 eligible ACRE members (Cornwall is not included on the scheme) have promoted the Rural Community Broadband Fund using their communication channels to raise the profile of the fund, providing early advice and signposting to more technical support where needed. In particular, Tees Valley RCC worked collaboratively with the five local Authorities to help deliver a successful bid of over £1m to the Rural Communities Broadband Fund. This is a significant and major piece of work resulting in some 3,500 more homes and businesses now expected to benefit from the new investment.

Case Study

Demand stimulation for broadband take-up

Rural Action Yorkshire (RAY) has a Community Development Broadband Officer who has delivered a successful demand stimulation pilot. It showed that targeted community based activities (e.g. showcasing superfast connection at a local pub, village specific marketing materials, local advice on placing receptors to expand wireless scheme reach) can increase take up of wireless broadband provision.

In the Dunsforth communities in Harrogate, broadband speeds were as slow as 1Mbps. Here LN Communications (trading as www.ilovebroadband.co.uk) now provide a signal to a local repeater on the chimney of The Dunsforth pub, from where it is delivered to local properties.

The local community had been hoping for a BT solution. However, as the Dunsforth communities are too far from the BT telephone cabinets to carry an effective signal along copper cables, and it was too expensive to provide fibre to individual premises, fixed wireless broadband was the best alternative solution and will deliver download speeds of 30Mbps.

The Broadband officer in RAY has been active in the local community attending parish meetings, designing and then distributing flyers to promote the arrival of Superfast Broadband. As the technology is different to a BT service, many people have questions; "How does the technology work?", "How is it installed?", and "What is the cost?"

To provide an opportunity to answer people's questions, a broadband surgery was arranged in the Dunsforth pub. People came along with their questions and could see for themselves the operation of the technology. It was a relaxing evening with representatives of LN Communications and the Superfast team answering questions and resulted in the majority of visitors asking to be connected to the service.

Rural Services

Ensuring that rural residents have good access to essential facilities and services and a place to meet in their communities are key challenges that the ACRE Network is helping to tackle. ACRE members have worked with local councils, delivery agents and independently to develop community-led solutions and initiatives.

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for rural services activity was **£526,688**, enabling an additional **£5,131,461** to be levered in from a range of local and national sources, delivering further benefits to rural communities. This additional investment includes service level agreements to deliver services such as supporting Parish Councils, outreach health services and community transports solutions. Some ACRE members are also directly funded to develop innovative solutions working with communities and other providers. In many cases jobs are secured and new jobs created.

What the Network set out to achieve:

Our members have provided grassroots intelligence and feedback on the local impacts, barriers, solutions and best practice in the delivery of rural services, particularly in the following key areas:

- Changes to health services and engagement with Clinical Commissioning Groups.
- Impacts of and solutions to an ageing demographic on services (how services are being delivered to meet the needs of an older rural population).
- New models of service delivery and best practice examples in rural communities.
- Post office network transformation.

Key outcomes delivered:

Delivering more integrated health and care services:

Our Network has supported the Government's commitment to provide more integrated health services. RCC experience and innovation has led to the development of a range of schemes that provide frontline support to help improve access to services such as Community Agents and the Village Care Programme.

The number of people in England who have health problems requiring both health and social care is increasing. For example, in the next 20 years, the percentage of people over 85 will double. This means there are likely to be more people with 'complex health needs' - more than one health problem - who require a combination of health and social care services.

But these services are rarely fully integrated. For example, people are admitted to hospital, or they stay in hospital too long, when it would have been better for them to receive care at home. Sometimes people get the same service twice - from the NHS and social care organisations - or an important part of their care is missing.

This means patients do not get the joined-up services they need, leaving them at increased risk of not fully recovering and the consequences of further treatment and possible hospital stays. Health and care staff may miss opportunities to make things better for patients and service users. Taxpayers' money could be used in more cost effective ways.

The Government wants everybody who uses both health and social care services to have integrated care services that work together to give the best care based on personal circumstances.

Delivering integrated care and health services – key examples of successful impact:

- **Tees Valley RCC** has established a Community Agents project supporting older people to remain at home with funding from NHS and Social Services in Redcar and Cleveland. The RCC currently employs 3 agents. Since the project started in September 2013 it has helped 273 people, mainly over 65 years old, with signposting to befriending and other support services. The needs identified by the Community Agent's project have led to the development of a car volunteer recruitment scheme, partially funded through the Clinical Commissioning Group, and this will be fully operational later in 2014.
- **Action in Rural Sussex's** Village Care Programme provides development support and practical help to rural communities, key activists, groups and organisations. This enables isolated and vulnerable older people, and their carers to remain active, independent, healthier and happy; and, if appropriate, in their home, with their family and in their community. In this year the project worked with over 265 organisations and each of these had at least 10 people that regularly attended their sessions.
- **Northamptonshire ACRE** is helping the village of Walgrave to develop a community centre for older people. Over 25% of the residents in the village are over 60 years of age and this is predicted to rise over the coming years. The head of social care at the local authority has provided funding to develop the project and 20 volunteers have been recruited so far.
- **Cornwall RCC** supports 'memory cafes' and has two dedicated Carer Support Workers that work directly with dementia and dementia-related support groups. The Carers service as a whole supports carers of people living with dementia.

Representing the needs of rural residents through the new health structures

Some ACRE members have pioneered the development and delivery of local Healthwatch services in rural communities. These are new organisations that build a national picture of the issues that matter most to consumers and users of health and care services. 31 RCCs have a working relationship with their local Healthwatch. Included in this figure are five RCCs which host their local Healthwatch, namely; Shropshire RCC, Gloucestershire Rural Community Council, Community Council of Devon, Community Impact Bucks and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Five have seats on their Healthwatch Board and more

than half of RCCs regularly attend Healthwatch meetings, raising issues of concern to rural residents they work with.

Some RCCs have worked with local Clinical Commissioning Groups and Health and Wellbeing Boards, influencing thinking and strategies about rural services and helping to provide access resources for rural beneficiaries. Our members have provided information to assist with the development of Service Delivery Plans and Joint Strategic Needs Assessments. There is however, evidence to suggest some of the CCGs have been very slow in understanding the contribution and experience of RCCs and other charities working in rural areas.

Rural representation through the new health structures:

- **Tees Valley RCC** - The Community Agents project in Redcar and Cleveland provides a pilot project which other organisations could use as a template for health support in rural areas. Tees Valley presented the background to the Community Agents project to the Friarage Hospital Voluntary Sector Forum in Northallerton. Members of the forum are following up with the idea of asking for funding from the CCG in North Yorkshire and they presented to the Stockton and Hartlepool Clinical Commissioning Group "Innovations Cave". A decision on funding will be made following the Teesside Universities evaluation of the project.

Sustaining Community Buildings and assets for community use

Through advice, support, training and access to the Hallmark Quality Standards Scheme ACRE and its members have helped to sustain the viability of the 10,000 village halls across rural England. Provision of the service provides opportunities for investigating alternative uses for halls that support rural community life. ACRE is working in partnership with the Charity Commission together with Locality, Community Matters and the Ethical Property Foundation to develop services that RCCs can provide to hall management committees. RCCs are helping to make it easier for village halls to operate by supporting management committees changing to the new legal structure, Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Delivering community-led health services

ACRE members have developed partnerships and innovative solutions to the deliver services to people in rural communities. For example, Warwickshire Rural Community Council has recently introduced a service to enable visually impaired people to go shopping. The service was developed with Warwickshire Association for the Blind. It uses a minibus under a section 22 permit (this covers not-for-profit organisations to transport passengers) and volunteer drivers and supporters to guide passengers onto the vehicle and around the supermarket. The RCC will be looking to extend the reach of the service over the coming months. The very first passenger, in February 2014, reported that this was the first time she had left her house since October 2013.

Case study Shropshire RCC

In November 2013, Shropshire RCC won the contract to further develop 'Gusto' – a friendship network for socially inactive adults who are keen to meet people and develop new interests following early retirement, bereavement, release from caring responsibilities or being new to the local area.

Gusto is a network of active people who meet regularly and enjoy participating in activities together. Activities include regular social events, like theatre trips, cycling, dog walking, going to the cinema, meeting for lunch and enjoying fine dining, cocktail evenings, photography, art classes etc.

Gusto is ideal for people who want to access new hobbies and don't want to do these things on their own. Members can also become hosts for the activities that they enjoy and share their interests with other members.

Shropshire RCC will develop Gusto with a sustainable membership model where people pay an annual membership fee and also pay a discounted rate for trips out and activities. It took over responsibility for the scheme from January 2014. The initial task was to consult potential members on the types of activities they would enjoy from a membership scheme. Following this the first activities and events began to happen, including a Photography Walk led by a local photographer.

Gusto fits well with the RCC's other work, by providing a new audience of people who may be interested in accessing its other services (oil buying, Get Shropshire Online) and by giving the organisation an earlier point of contact with people who are entering later life, which will mean more effective help can be provided more quickly via the RCC;s 'Wise and Well' team which promotes independent living.

Rural Transport

Access to work and essential services present greater challenges and costs for rural communities due to their distance from local service centres. These include the daily commute, education and training opportunities, health services, shopping, leisure, and other social activities.

Getting where they want to go, when they need to be there, is particularly challenging for the elderly, the infirm, young people and families who lack their own transport. ACRE members are helping to tackle this by providing direct community-led transport solutions tailored to local needs and support for those communities looking for their own solution.

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for Rural Transport activity was £229,708, enabling an additional £1,786,612 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources, delivering further benefits to rural communities.

What the Network set out to achieve:

Our network provided grassroots intelligence and feedback on local impacts, barriers, solutions and best practice in rural transport, particularly in the following areas:

- Barriers, solutions and best practice on community transport initiatives
- Local impacts of changes in transport services
- Local intelligence on transport issues as they impact on and are a driver for rural economic growth and employment (barriers, solutions and best practice examples)

Key outcomes delivered

Our Network has worked closely with local authorities to improve transport and accessibility to services for rural communities. A key success has been the development of improved transport hubs. RCCs also provide frontline rural transport services including car share schemes enabling thousands of rural people to travel who would otherwise be unable to.

Key examples of rural transport work:

- **Tees Valley RCC** Transport Brokerage Service maximises minibus usage, ensuring that rural residents can access transport when they need it and increasing income for providers by ensuring the minibuses are used to maximum capacity.
- **Bedfordshire RCC** Community Transport Brokerage Service has a pool of volunteer drivers trained to Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme. Minibuses are hired for a range of purposes including leisure, shopping, access to training & community consultations and camps & residential events. Regular users include Aragon Housing Association and Tibbs Dementia Foundation (the minibus is used to transport clients suffering from dementia to a weekly Music4Memory group).
- **Community Action Cheshire** manages a Community Car Scheme. This enables members of the community to get out and about. In particular transportation to activities that reduce isolation such as "Men in Sheds" – a national charitable operation run by Age Concern. One user said that the Community Car Scheme had made a major difference to his quality of life, and the efforts of the staff and volunteer drivers were appreciated.

Information and advice hubs for community transport

Community transport hubs aim to improve access to Community Transport such as car sharing schemes and ensure that providers become more business-like, improving the sustainability of the sector. ACRE members provide advice and support to the hubs and will help with accessing funding. However, a successful hub can increase demand for available transport and our members help with recruitment of additional volunteers to drive the minibuses and cars.

Rural proofing local transport policy and delivery

The Network continues to raise awareness of rural transport issues with local authorities; in particular, the impacts of cuts to rural public bus services and need for support for community transport solutions.

Key examples of rural proofing:

- **Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC)**. In the Forest of Dean the District Council, Gloucestershire County Council, community transport providers and GRCC has a Community Transport Partnership agreement. They have worked together to coordinate community transport services across the district and secured £300,000 Big Lottery funding. This funding included evaluation and community consultation.
- **Community Impact Bucks (CIB)** is funded by Buckinghamshire County Council to support the creation and demand stimulation of community transport schemes. CIB is also working with the County Council and Buckinghamshire Community Foundation in the creation, support and administration of the Community Transport Challenge Fund. This fund supports the creation of new schemes and the sustainability of others.

Operating vital community car schemes

Ten RCCs run community transport schemes. Typically the number of volunteers per RCC scheme is 30 to 50 people. However, Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire has 350 volunteers and Oxfordshire RCC has 1,300.

RCCs reported on the total number of individual passenger journeys completed in the last year (an individual passenger journey was defined as one person travelling one way):

- Numbers ranged from 1,000 to approaching 30,000 individual passenger journeys (Nottinghamshire)
- The average number of individual passenger journeys per response was over 6,800
- The total number of passenger journeys was over 258,000.

Increased attendance for health appointments is a key element of this work – missed appointments cost the taxpayer and it is well documented that the further away people are from health centres, the less likely they are to attend.

Case study

£1m volunteers travel 40 times round the world

Volunteers for Wiltshire's Link Schemes have put in a colossal effort to help others in the past 12 months – including travelling 992,379 miles – the equivalent of 40 times around the world – completing 54,434 tasks and working 155,544 hours, at an economic value of just under £1 million.

An audit of the Wiltshire Link Schemes, which are supported by Community First, shows the enormous contribution volunteers make to the lives of others. The 45 Link Schemes in Wiltshire cover 98% of the county and involve volunteers helping people who can't do everyday tasks for themselves, such as getting to GP or hospital appointments, doing the shopping or tidying up the garden.

Link Schemes are entirely volunteer run and based in local communities. 1,746 Wiltshire volunteers donated their time and efforts to over 1000 people each week in 2013, helping older people to remain independent in their own homes and reducing social isolation for those in rural communities.

Community First's audit showed that the most frequent requests for help in 2013 were for getting to medical appointments, shopping for food, reading to people and transport to luncheon clubs and social events. But other volunteers also visit people just for a chat or to help with small household tasks.

"We are in a time of unprecedented social and economic change that has seen reductions in public spending and changes to health and social care," said Community First Chief Executive Philippa Read. "People in rural areas are ageing at a faster rate than their urban counterparts and there is going to be a 21% increase in the numbers of older people living in Wiltshire by 2026 - these people will also live longer.

"That makes the work of these volunteers all the more remarkable and all the more important. It is a fantastic achievement that contributes so much to local communities and to local people's lives. We can't thank all these volunteers enough for all that they have done and continue to do."

Linda O'Gorman, Link Project Officer at Community First, said there has been a steady increase in requests for help from Link Schemes in recent years.

"The Link Schemes are the largest volunteering network in Wiltshire and each of the 1,746 volunteers throughout the county makes a small contribution which improves the lives of many clients. Many older residents need help with small things that the rest of us take for granted, and sometimes the Link volunteer is the only friendly face a person sees or the only contact they have with their community.

"To have so many volunteers contributing so much is a really amazing achievement. Volunteers tell us they also get a great deal of pleasure from their work with the Link Schemes, but there's no doubt that the contribution they make to others is invaluable."

Community Energy Schemes and Fuel Poverty

With many rural areas typified by a high percentage of inefficient, solid-wall housing and many homes without a connection to the mains gas grid, rural communities face unique fuel poverty challenges.

ACRE and its members are helping to tackle these challenges by raising awareness of Government programmes to improve energy efficiency, such as the Green Deal and ECO. We also work with central government, local authorities and other organisations on a variety of local energy projects.

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for Community Energy and Fuel Poverty activity was £300,008, enabling an additional £1,047,778 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources, delivering further benefits to rural communities.

What the Network set out to achieve:

- Promote the Rural Community Renewable Energy Fund and signpost help for communities interested in applying
- Provide local intelligence on the barriers, solutions and best practice for the development of community energy initiatives
- Provide local intelligence on the barriers, solutions and best practice for tackling fuel poverty

Key outcomes delivered

Our Network has provided information to Defra which highlights the issues for those living in off-gas communities and the additional costs of bringing older properties up to a sufficient standard of energy efficiency - particularly as fuel poor households can be averse to taking on debt to complete house improvements.

The Network has also managed local and national programmes and initiatives providing information and support for rural communities. These include the Warm Homes, Healthy People Fund, Big Energy Saving Week and Energy Best Deal Sessions – which have enabled rural residents to understand the benefits of energy efficiency in terms of health and financial savings.

Twenty-five members of the ACRE Network run community oil-buying schemes, purchasing more than seven million litres each year on behalf of rural customers helping them to save money. Scheme members pay a small annual fee for their orders to be placed by a local co-ordinator who buys in bulk, negotiating the best price per litre. As well as helping the environment by reducing the amount of traffic and fuel consumption by oil tankers, the schemes gets communities working together and encourages volunteering.

Better informed consumers able to make informed choices

The Buy Early (heating oil) campaign initiative is a partnership between DECC, ACRE, Citizens Advice and the Federation of Petroleum Suppliers which was promoted by the ACRE Network. This enabled the message to go directly to the 50,000 grassroots organisations that our network reaches. Support and advice was offered about the benefits and savings from buying early.

Improving community buildings

Energy efficiency in village halls and other community buildings is now more important than ever due to rising energy costs. Our members have been carrying out energy audits on community buildings to help hall committees upgrade their properties and access grant funding. Our members have arranged site visits to demonstrate the practicalities of installed renewable energy technologies to help Buildings Managers understand the benefits and barriers. Oxfordshire RCC, working with Oxford Brookes University and the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, held an 'Enrich' showcase event; celebrating energy efficiency achievements after 2 years of working in Oxfordshire. Milestones include over 70 audits in

Village Halls, over 600 actions recommended, and over 75% implemented or planned to be implemented.

Helping rural residents save money on their fuel bills

The number of members of oil buying consortia run by ACRE members varies from 35 up to 2,614. The quantity of oil purchased by each group in the year 2013 varied between 17,000 and 1.7m litres. Four groups purchased over 1m litres, and three less than 100,000 litres. The 17 other groups purchased an average of 435,000 litres. The total amount of oil purchased was in excess of 13m litres. Using the average saving of 4.9 pence per litre from the average price, this represents a total estimated saving of almost £650,000 for members of all 25 schemes.

Some of the oil buying schemes run by the RCCs are extending their services to provide extra help by making new alliances. One is offering free membership to the over 70s by working with their local Community Foundation, four have added LPG to their offer, one offers wood, and two have formed partnerships with a local Credit Union to enable members to save and pay for their oil on a monthly basis.

Case study

Cornwall Rural Community Council and Citizens Advice (CAB) Cornwall have launched a new joint Get F+IT (financially and IT) project, which works with rurally isolated older people to improve their financial security, reduce fuel hardship and also helps them to get IT savvy.

This innovative project is funded by Comic Relief, and is running for three years from July 2013. It works by providing:

- Energy surgeries to explore and compare energy provider options, and community fuel buying schemes, and provide the IT support to help people swap energy providers, and access the 'best deals'.
- Locally run financial 'surgeries' on making money go further-including budgeting, maximising income, and dealing with creditors.
- IT surgeries to introduce information technology and the benefits and useful applications of ICT, including shopping online and 'Skype-ing'.

The Get FIT project will also have the added benefit of dedicated CAB outreach workers who will be able to visit people in their own homes and check they are receiving the benefits they are entitled to, and also, where necessary provide specialist debt advice.

In the first 6 months of Get F+IT, the project worked with 142 individuals.

Affordable Housing and Planning

The delivery of housing is a key issue faced by rural communities, mainly due to the shortage of affordable housing in rural areas and the tensions that building new homes can create locally.

Alongside the slow market for new housing, there have been several policy changes affecting housing such as the new National Planning Policy Framework, Neighbourhood Planning and the Community Right to Build. ACRE and its members have been working nationally and locally to help communities understand and make the most of these changes.

The investment from Defra for 2013/14 in the ACRE Network for Affordable Housing and Planning activity was £387,581, enabling an additional £2,130,129 to be levered in from a range of local and national sources, delivering further benefits to rural communities.

What the Network set out to achieve

Provide grassroots intelligence and feedback on local impacts, barriers, solutions and best practice in the delivery of affordable housing and community engagement in planning and development.

Key outcomes delivered

Our network has worked with local authorities to ensure Local Plans for housing are rural proofed and campaigned on behalf of rural residents. Traditional rural housing enabling work is still ongoing in 16 RCCs; focusing on raising awareness of the challenges that rural communities face in accessing affordable housing, which is vital to the sustainability of these communities. The greatest shift in this housing support has been the development of Community Land Trust (CLT) support projects. Seven RCCs are developing CLT umbrellas and providing dedicated support for community housing initiatives.

Where there is no funding for a Rural Housing Enabler role, RCCs continue to promote rural housing issues and initiatives through Community Led Planning and Neighbourhood Planning activity. At a strategic level, rural housing is still recognised as a key issue for rural communities. RCCs represent this through a variety of membership participation in Local Authority, County, and Local Enterprise Partnership housing forums.

Removing barriers to the delivery of rural affordable housing

ACRE members have worked in partnership with local authorities to raise the importance of rural proofing housing policies as their local plans are published. Most RCCs have a seat on housing groups in local authorities or influence policy development via other routes such as housing trusts. The key focus of this work is to encourage each local authority to carry out a rural housing needs survey.

ACRE and its members have been successful in promoting the importance of rural housing in consultations and strategic forums, helping ensure recognition of the need to develop rural affordable housing.

Key examples of rural affordable housing delivery:

- **Warwickshire RCC** recently signed a new five-year agreement with Stratford-on-Avon District Council to ensure the continuation of a special project which helps provide vital new homes for local people.

Around 75% of the district's population live outside the largest town, Stratford-upon-Avon, in a network of over 100 villages and market towns. Since the beginning of the Stratford-on-Avon Rural Housing Enabler Project in 2003, the RCC has worked with over 50 rural communities to carry out Housing Needs Surveys. Over 140 affordable homes have been provided ensuring the continued sustainability and vitality of those rural communities.

The schemes enable local people, who would otherwise have been forced to move away because of high house prices or the lack of suitable accommodation, to stay, or even return, to their local communities.

Delivery of rural affordable housing

ACRE members have raised the profile of affordable housing with stakeholders and supported its practical delivery by undertaking housing needs surveys and identifying land for building. They have been key players in unlocking development land by working as the 'bridge' between communities and developers. The trusted support that ACRE members bring is welcomed by rural communities, especially with so many opportunities being presented by the new localism rights for community-led development. ACRE members helped to unlock barriers in relation to development land and addressed obstacles to delivery. At the end of March 2014 RCCs indicated there were 135 rural exception schemes, comprising 1,559 units of housing either with planning permission or awaiting a planning decision.

Case studies

Gloucestershire

Bibury (Cotswold District) – A housing need survey (HNS) was carried out in 2006. The Rural Housing Enabler worked with the Parish Council to identify potential exception sites. Comments were obtained from District Council planners and a public consultation undertaken. In 2010, the parish council supported a review of housing need and a second HNS was undertaken, revealing a substantial increase in the number of households in need of affordable housing. A housing association was invited to commence negotiations with a land owner. Finally, a planning application was submitted for 11 dwellings for rent in 2013 with consent granted early 2014 and start on site in March 2014. Completion is anticipated over winter 2014/15.

Devon

Whimple (East Devon) – 5 rent (mix of social and affordable), 2 shared ownership, 3 open

market. The homes were completed in early 2014. The project was initiated by the District Council which approached the Parish Council with a suggestion to use local authority land to build affordable homes and provide the village with allotments. The Rural Housing Enabler (RHE) carried out the housing needs survey which identified the need for 31 affordable homes for local people. Spectrum Housing Group was engaged to carry out the development. The scheme has been notable for the close partnership working between the Parish Council, the Housing Association, the district enabler and the RHE. A number of barriers, including site viability, were addressed by this team. The design of the homes has been greatly affected by input from the Parish Council and consultation with the community. The homes are currently in the process of being allocated to local people.

Appendix A – Governance and Grant Allocations

Governance

The Grant Agreement between Defra and the ACRE Network commenced in April 2011, following on from a previous three-year arrangement.

The partnership has been steered by the Governance Group, comprising senior staff from Defra and ACRE and independent representatives from the Department of Communities and Local Government, Office for Civil Society, Commission for Rural Communities and National Association of Local Councils.

Officers from Defra and ACRE have also met on a regular basis to review the operation of the partnership.

Grant Allocations

ACRE has been responsible allocating the grant funds amongst the ACRE Network. During 2013-14, the allocation was made using the same objective formula as had been used to apportion funds in the latter years of the previous grant agreement. That formula had been devised by an external expert in consultation with ACRE members to ensure that the distribution of funds was equitable.

Each of the 38 local ACRE members (county-based Rural Community Councils) received a sum based on:

- a flat rate payment of £40,000, plus
- a variable payment which depended on the Rural Population, Rural Disadvantage, Geographical Size, number of Local Authorities and number of Local Area Agreements within that ACRE member's territory.

The full list of 2013-14 Grant Allocations to local ACRE members is given in Appendix B.

In 2013-14 ACRE was allocated £90,000 towards the management, programme compliance and intelligence reporting aspects of the Agreement.

Appendix B – Grants to ACRE Members

2013/14 Grant

<i>Bedfordshire</i>	<i>£47,952</i>
<i>Berkshire</i>	<i>£46,833</i>
<i>Buckinghamshire</i>	<i>£51,953</i>
<i>Cambridgeshire</i>	<i>£58,330</i>
<i>Cheshire</i>	<i>£52,569</i>
<i>Cornwall</i>	<i>£60,158</i>
<i>Cumbria</i>	<i>£64,586</i>
<i>Derbyshire</i>	<i>£58,346</i>
<i>Devon</i>	<i>£69,355</i>
<i>Dorset</i>	<i>£54,726</i>
<i>Durham</i>	<i>£56,368</i>
<i>Essex</i>	<i>£61,647</i>
<i>Gloucestershire</i>	<i>£52,228</i>
<i>Hampshire</i>	<i>£58,942</i>
<i>Hereford/Worcestershire</i>	<i>£58,023</i>
<i>Hertfordshire</i>	<i>£50,804</i>
<i>Humber & Wolds</i>	<i>£55,609</i>
<i>Isle of Wight</i>	<i>£45,614</i>
<i>Kent</i>	<i>£64,913</i>
<i>Lancashire</i>	<i>£58,408</i>
<i>Leicestershire</i>	<i>£54,664</i>
<i>Lincolnshire</i>	<i>£64,295</i>
<i>Norfolk</i>	<i>£66,720</i>
<i>Northamptonshire</i>	<i>£53,540</i>
<i>Northumberland</i>	<i>£56,141</i>
<i>Nottinghamshire</i>	<i>£53,899</i>
<i>Oxfordshire</i>	<i>£52,750</i>
<i>Shropshire</i>	<i>£53,354</i>
<i>Somerset</i>	<i>£58,183</i>
<i>Staffordshire</i>	<i>£56,136</i>
<i>Suffolk</i>	<i>£59,725</i>
<i>Surrey</i>	<i>£51,634</i>
<i>Sussex</i>	<i>£62,285</i>
<i>Tees Valley</i>	<i>£46,092</i>
<i>Warwickshire</i>	<i>£50,276</i>
<i>West of England</i>	<i>£48,665</i>
<i>Wiltshire</i>	<i>£54,529</i>
<i>Yorkshire</i>	<i>£89,748</i>
LOCAL MEMBERS TOTAL	£2,160,000