

PRESS RELEASE

Defra's £6m investment in rural communities pays off

A £6m Government investment has enabled England's 38 rural community councils (RCCs) to pull in an additional £15m in funding, a new report has evaluated.

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) commissioned the independent report to evaluate the first two years of a four-year agreement with Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), the national umbrella body for RCCs.

The report shows that for every £1 received from Defra, the ACRE Network secured £2.80 from other sources to use in its work in helping rural communities find innovative solutions to the challenges they face.

ACRE said the findings showed its Network was a trusted voice that provided 'good value for money' to funders.

The report found:

- 38% of the Defra investment was spent on housing and planning
- 36% was spent on transport, services and facilities
- 14% was spent on fuel poverty and energy generation
- 12% was spent on broadband
- 75% of town/parish councils surveyed had used the ACRE Network for advice or support in the past two years
- Beneficiaries struggled to name other suitable organisations they could turn to if the Network was not there.

ACRE chief executive Janice Banks said: "There is no doubt that this investment has enabled us to make a difference in the 11,000 rural communities we work with across England – whether that's by delivering support on the ground, influencing local decision makers or feeding back intelligence from our 40,000 grass roots contacts to Defra to shape national policy.

"As the report points out, the average Defra investment in an RCC in 2012/13 was £62,000, which was used alongside an average £217,000 of funding from other sources. That Defra is able to secure the scale of activity provided by our Network from such a relatively small pot of funding represents good value for money."

More follows

The report, by Brian Wilson Associates, highlighted that “whilst other networks are working with communities, no other network has the specific rural focus of the ACRE Network”.

“National and local beneficiaries generally struggled to think of other organisations they could have turned to for advice, support or intelligence,” said the report.

Ms Banks added: “We agree with the authors that there is little appetite in local authorities to fund this type of work. Without the Defra investment, it largely would not have happened.”

ACRE said it would take on board the lessons learned from the evaluation – which included the need to progress more work on broadband, to better engage with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and to involve other Government departments more often with the work of its expert groups.

Ms Banks said: “While there are lessons to be learned from the past two years, the report clearly shows the benefits to communities – from affordable housing and upgraded village halls, to warmer homes and faster broadband networks.

“Clearly we have work to do on broadband and LEPs. We have been finding it harder to engage with the commercial and business sectors and are continually looking to break down these barriers.

“Overall, however, we are extremely pleased with the report and the value it places on the work of the ACRE Network.”

Defra said “We welcome the findings of the evaluation and the conclusion that our investment in the ACRE Network has delivered good value for money. The report and case studies highlight the many benefits that have been delivered to rural communities locally such as oil buying schemes helping to reduce the cost of heating rural homes and influencing local policies to ensure rural needs are recognised and addressed.”

Ends

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Note to editors: The report can be found on the Defra website.

<http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&ProjectID=18716&FromSearch=Y&Status=3&Publisher=1&SearchText=Brian%20Wilson&SortString=ProjectCode&SortOrder=Asc&Paging=10#Description>

