Thank you for taking the time to read this Annual Review, which aims to demonstrate the clear link between our 38 county based members working on the ground with rural communities, and our own activity nationally on policy in support of that local delivery.

It is a symbiotic and fundamental relationship linked in common purpose to improve the wellbeing of England’s rural communities.

Travelling around the country, I am constantly inspired by the diversity of activity carried out by our members with those communities, a small snapshot of which is included in this Review.

Whilst identifying ACRE’s role in sharing, supporting and spreading best practice, the Review also highlights our growing commitment to advocate for those living in rural areas; informing and influencing nationally, often in partnership with others.

It is heartening that Defra, our sponsoring department within Government, continues to recognise the added value provided by the ACRE Network. Defra’s investment inspires others, both locally and nationally, to follow suit; enabling us to continue to build on our collective strengths, including our knowledge, understanding and experience of ‘what works’ in rural communities. This track record and the ACRE Network’s ongoing commitment to renewal and modernisation, ensures that it will be well placed to help these communities to adapt to the challenges and opportunities they face.

Together, we reach 52,000 grassroots organisations & 11,000 rural communities.
Case Study

Miss D was referred to her local Village Agent when a neighbour who took her shopping felt she had memory problems. Miss D would forget what day it was and ask to go shopping daily. She did not have any family support, and her friends were concerned.

The Agent visited and found that Miss D was an independent lady who liked to do things her own way. She did admit having difficulty knowing what day of the week it was and was delighted at the Agent’s suggestion of obtaining a special digital clock giving the day of the week, which the Agent had researched online. She chose a radio-controlled one, which never needs adjusting, and ordered it by phone with the Agent’s help. When the clock arrived, the Agent visited again and set it up for her.

Miss D also agreed to have a ‘Message in a Wallet’ containing her personal details in case of emergency. In helping her fill it in, the Agent was able to discuss her next of kin details. It transpired that Miss D has two nieces and the Agent was able to get in touch with them. One niece is now in regular contact and Miss D’s friends feel better knowing that there is family they can contact with any concerns.

A lack of services such as health care, transport or appropriate housing can make rural life impossible for those who are most vulnerable.

ACRE and our members have had a special focus on mental and physical health this year and have worked on projects such as ‘LaceUp’ with Sport England, aimed at getting communities active. We also held our first ‘Loneliness Forum’ working with Dixa to provide training for professionals and community organisations.

Many of our members run Good Neighbour Schemes, Village Agents, suicide prevention schemes and Men in Sheds. Locally, the ACRE Network has played a huge part in supporting vulnerable members of the community and in helping the NHS and social care services reach out to rural communities.

The Issue

To provide the best possible service on a tight budget the NHS continues to centralise its services; this means that services are concentrated in more populated areas. This limits access for many rural people, especially those who are vulnerable on low incomes, without transport or with few family and friends to help them. In addition, the extra travel cost of providing social care in rural areas ends up limiting the help people get.

The Impact

People living in rural areas don’t receive the same level of NHS or social care support as those in urban areas. Smaller hospitals serving rural areas are often in special measures, can’t recruit staff or are facing closure. People receiving packages of social care in rural areas often get less help and little contact because travel time isn’t properly accounted for or resourced.

Policy & Asks

We believe a creative approach to rural health and care is needed. The relationships between regional centres, local health hubs, general practice and social care must be planned and organised differently in rural areas. The preferred approach to delivering adult social care in rural areas should be through small and social enterprise providers.

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Rural Health & Care

Stats 2018 - 2019

The ACRE Network has supported:

- 18,833 people suffering with their physical or mental health

- 94 Training events

- 924 Home visits

87% of our members support wellbeing schemes including:

- Good Neighbours
- Men in Sheds
- Suicide Prevention
- Loneliness Support
- Village Agents
For rural people, access is particularly important because of losses to their vital local services such as shops, banks, schools and healthcare facilities. But getting connected isn’t just about practical things; it’s also about emotional health. Poor access to services can leave rural people feeling a bit ‘castaway’ leading to isolation and loneliness. Yet the solution benefits us all - regardless of where we live. Statistics show that rural residents drive more miles, so with better quality public transport and digital provisions, rural residents would cut their CO2 emissions and be able to do their bit for climate change.

ACRE gave evidence to the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s Broadband and Digital inquiry. Our members offer support to get their communities online as well as running and supporting community transport schemes and digital hubs.

The Issue
In rural areas, people often have to travel to services or access them online, but subsidised bus services are one of the first things to go when local government makes cuts or connectivity providers (mobile, broadband and telecoms companies) prioritise urban areas, as they can make more money where they have more customers.

The Impact
Rural people struggle to access basic services such as healthcare, employment, Job Centres, and education. Poor accessibility puts off new businesses, which impacts the rural economy. The most vulnerable are young people, whose urban counterparts often have free and plentiful transport, and people who don’t wish to, or cannot, drive such as older people or those with disabilities.

Without excellent, affordable connectivity rural people are unable to:
- Use a smartphone
- Make an appointment
- Use a community bus
- Use local services
- Shop online
- Buy online
- Use a digital hub

Policy & Asks
Public services for rural people should be planned and resourced so that nobody is unreasonably disadvantaged by where they live. With new digitally enabled services, government must become more creative in how it uses its regulatory powers. By doing so, it will also ensure that economies of scale achieved in urban areas benefit the whole population in both urban and rural communities.

Case Study
ACRE Network member Cornwall Rural Community Charity (CRCC), runs a project called ‘Aged Veterans’ which supports individuals who have served in the forces. The CRCC’s Get FiT project (Finance and IT) helps Veterans develop their IT skills and get their finances in order while improving their confidence and safety online.

Dave was signposted to CRCC after qualifying for a Royal Naval Association initiative for isolated veterans. He’d been provided with an iPad and he and his wife (also his carer) attended a session. At first Dave was reluctant, he didn’t see the point and was worried about online safety. But as he continued to attend the IT sessions his confidence increased, and he used his iPad more. CRCC was able to assist him, showing him how the device could help in his everyday life.

Now, Dave not only manages his finances online, he uses the iPad every day to contact friends and family via video calls. By being able to use technology, he’s not only accessing essential services, but also improving his health and wellbeing by staying connected to loved ones.
Keeping Communities Connected

- 47% of our members have supported digital training in their communities
- 2,233 People have been Digitally Skilled
- 37% of our members support community transport schemes
- 148,551 people have been helped by ACRE Network community transport schemes

ACRE has responded or submitted evidence to:
- 2 Verbal Evidence Inquiries
- 4 Government Consultations
Drawing on our unique rural expertise, we advise government on how to shape policy that delivers rural affordable housing. Complementing this, our members provide direct hands-on support to communities, helping them identify their housing needs and take action to meet them by working with councils, housing associations or building and owning their own Community Led Housing schemes.

The Issue

Earnings in rural areas are lower than those in urban areas. But house prices are higher.

Rural households on a low local income would need 9 times their income to buy the cheapest homes in the local housing market.

Affordable housing should be provided at a cost that is truly affordable to those dependent on low incomes working in the local economy.

Government should ensure that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) require an on-site affordable housing contribution in communities of less than 3000 people and from sites of 10 or fewer houses.

Government funding should reflect the higher costs associated with the delivery of small affordable housing schemes in rural areas.

Statutory protections that ensure affordable homes remain in the social housing sector should not be eroded.

The Impact

The number of working age residents in rural areas is declining. Young people move away for education and stay away for employment and housing. Local businesses lose custom; and can’t retain a workforce. The result? The social and economic fabric of rural communities is at breaking point.

With the combined support of a local landowner, Minsterworth Parish Council, Minsterworth Village Hall Trust, Rooftop Housing Group, Tewkesbury Borough Council and GRCC the project finally completed in Summer 2018.

A successful rural exception project started in 2011 when the ACRE member in Gloucestershire (GRCC) was asked by Minsterworth Parish Council to undertake a survey that would identify local people’s housing needs.

Case Study

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14 affordable homes were built for local people to rent or buy and on 9 April 2019 the official opening was marked with the unveiling of a plaque by The Princess Royal.
Rural Housing
Stats 2018 - 2019

The ACRE Network has supported the delivery of:

315 Affordable Dwellings in rural areas
14 Housing events
809 people trained
10,535 Housing Need Survey forms

The ACRE Network has:

- Responded or submitted evidence to:
  - 4 Government & National Inquiries
  - 4 Government Consultations

ACRE Staff Time Invested:

- 450 Hours
Working with Defra

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has invested more than £8m in the ACRE Network over the past four years in recognition of our unique ability to engage with both national and local government and rural grassroots organisations and communities.

Under the Agreement, Defra provided the ACRE Network with a total grant of £1,862,000 for the year 2018/19. Over 95% was distributed to the 38 local ACRE Network members, who on average received £46,737 each.

Loneliness Forum with Defra

Defra asked ACRE to arrange a rural stakeholder forum in March 2019 to advise and support the work of government departments and help with the local communication of initiatives and good practice. The event was well supported with over 56 people attending.

ACRE AGM & Conference

We were pleased to host speakers Tim Goldship at Defra, Claire Saunders Director of The Prince’s Countryside Fund and Professor Mark Shucksmith OBE of Newcastle University. The afternoon closed with a panel discussion featuring Harriet English Head of Engagement for the Plunkett Foundation, Crispin Truman OBE, CEO of CPRE and Jo Laverick CEO of ACRE Network member Durham Community Action.

The event was kindly sponsored by Allied Westminster.

Working with Europe

ACRE led a project that was part of the European Rural Parliament: ROAD (Rural Opinion Advocacy & Development) programme. The project was launched at the Scottish Rural Parliament in November 2018 and explored how the UK & Ireland can maintain links with European rural communities after Brexit. ACRE worked with PLANED, Irish Rural Link, Irish Local Development Network (ILDN), Rural Community Network NI and Scottish Rural Action, all of whom will attend the European Rural Parliament in Asturias.

A New Partnership with NCVO

In December 2018 we announced a new strategic partnership with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). Whilst ACRE remains independent and fully accountable to our members, this means we can enhance our resources and support for rural communities. As part of the partnership, all ACRE members have full access to NCVO membership benefits free-of-charge. We hope to bring an authentic rural perspective to the partnership.

Working for a Rural Strategy

We worked with the Rural Services Network (RSN), the Plunkett Foundation and the Rural Coalition to call for a rural strategy. As part of our collaborative several roadshows were organised around the country.

ACRE is a member of and provides the secretariat for the Rural Coalition. The Rural Coalition is thirteen national organisations with many shared values, seeking to be more influential by joining in common cause.

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

ACRE has a vibrant history of collaborating with others on research, guidance, training, publications, campaigns and joint funding bids.
In 2018 ACRE was successful in securing funds from Sport England for a project called LaceUp. LaceUp aimed to increase leisure activities and community exercise in rural communities.

The one year pilot project funded by Sport England and managed by ACRE promoted cost effective physical activity and engagement in sport and healthy lifestyles in rural communities. Projects in Cumbria and Wiltshire were able to apply for up to £10,000 to support the local health and wellbeing of rural residents and increase physical activity locally.

ACRE has been working with Locality and other community focussed organisations to build an exciting new website, ‘My community’ to support community activists.

ACRE is a member of the End Fuel Poverty Coalition which is a broad coalition of anti-poverty, environmental, health, trade union and consumer organisations working to eradicate fuel poverty.
Did you know that as well as being charitable and community owned, they are all managed by volunteers? We estimate there are 80,000 volunteers running village halls, and our unique services support them through our network of specialist advisers. Allied Westminster is the principle supporter of ACRE’s advice service for village halls. It’s important to us that village halls thrive because they are the corner stones of rural communities. Providing an essential space for everything from fitness classes to important life events such as christenings and birthdays; they also fill gaps in services often hosting post offices, shops, pre-schools and pop-up pubs.

What we love most about village halls is their ability to bring people together, playing a huge part in tackling loneliness. We are encouraged to see village halls evolving; some are digital hubs and some halls are increasingly supporting innovative energy solutions such as car charging points or leading the way by installing solar panels and ground source heat pumps, setting an example in their communities.

Village Halls Week 2019

Organised by ACRE and our members, the campaign runs in January and sees a huge variety of events happening across England.

Village Halls Week ran for the first time in 2018 and received overwhelming support from rural communities. The response from our members and rural communities alike was so positive we decided to run Village Halls Week again in 2019 and here’s what happened...

15 events held.

The launch took place in Cambridgeshire with Cambridgeshire ACRE who had an event celebrating the history of village halls. Sponsored by Allied Westminster

Stand-up poet Kate Fox was commissioned by our friends at the National Rural Touring Forum to write a brilliant piece which amusingly captures the range of events you might find at your local village hall

Ian McMillan, renowned poet and broadcaster, celebrated village halls in his own spectacular way by introducing his audience to a special collection of peculiar posters and notes from the village halls where he has performed. The event was held by Community Action Northumberland and was a fantastic way to say thank you for all their members’ hard work. Last year’s feature ‘A Tea Pot as Big as the Moon’ a poem especially commissioned for Village Halls Week by the National Rural Touring Forum was sponsored by Allied Westminster.

Annual Training Event 2018

Every year ACRE organises a members training event for village and community hall advisers.

In April 2018 we held the 19th training event in Peterborough. Advisors from 33 counties attended to share and improve their knowledge and skills. They brushed up on GDPR, Fire Risk Assessment, Health and Safety and Constitutional structures with sessions from The Charity Commission and Bates Wells Solicitors. ACRE is grateful to HAGs, Booking Spaces, Cameo Curtains, Utility Aid, Defib Store and Community Re-Paint for supporting the event. Sponsored by Norris and Fisher and Ansvar.
Children’s author and illustrator Steve Anthony held an event for GRCC in Chedworth Village Hall where he did a workshop with the children of Chedworth school. Sponsored by Booking Spaces.

Village Halls Week also saw support from advocates of combatting loneliness. The British Red Cross and Lincolnshire Co-op. Both wrote blogs in support of village halls as a key tool for combating social isolation in rural communities. Village Halls Week and many of its members were also featured in a blog by Zurich for charities.

Networking and training events were held in: Cheshire, Cumbria, Derbyshire, Durham, Northampton, Northumberland, Staffordshire, Tees Valley and Yorkshire.
Small village hall charities are not VAT registered. This means that a £200,000 refurbishment project incurs an extra £40,000 in non-reclaimable VAT - Ouch! A tax on voluntary effort which is widely felt to be unfair. Because of this, the ACRE Network has spent years lobbying MPs and collating evidence and key arguments.

In September 2018 ACRE submitted a budget representation, supported by evidence from many village hall committees, urging The Government to pledge £3 million in the Budget to refund the VAT paid by village halls on improvement work.

After a lot of hard work, ACRE was delighted when we were asked to deliver a £3 million grant programme to help charitable halls carry out improvement works to their building. The Village Hall Improvement Grant Fund was launched in April 2019. The Launch Event was held at Oxton Village Hall in Nottinghamshire and welcomed the presence of Defra Minister Lord Gardiner of Kimble and local MP and Government Minister Robert Jenrick.

Image left to right: Robert Jenrick MP, Lord Gardiner of Kimble, Chair of ACRE David Emerson, CBE
Our Trustees’ investment over the past few years has seen ACRE and our members gathering stronger, more authentic evidence, both of what is happening to, and what needs to happen for, rural communities. Our unique resource, combining a network of staff, trustees and local village organisations with their experience and insight across the diversity of rural England, has enabled us to develop policies covering housing, access, communications and especially health and social care.

We have taken every opportunity to put these forward, whether by responding to formal consultations, working with Government or giving evidence to Select Committees in both the Commons and the Lords. We see clearly that the strength of our firmly evidenced arguments is having an impact, and this has led to our views being sought more frequently across new policy and thematic areas, enabling us to make the case for those of our beneficiaries most disadvantaged by rurality.

Rural communities are the critical component that sustains the rural environment. It is the increasing confidence in our knowledge and understanding of these communities that will, I believe, enable us to pursue our mission of articulating their views and priorities even more effectively, whatever the political, economic and environmental changes may bring.

David Emerson, CBE
ACRE Chair

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Income: £2,368,644

Breakdown of Other
- Nationwide Foundation (2.8%)
- Allied Westminster (1.5%)
- RCBLF (0.8%)
- Conferences (0.8%)
- Donations & Interest (0.5%)
- Other Income (0.5%)
- VHIG (0.4%)
- European Rural Parliament (0.4%)

Expenditure: £2,350,216

Breakdown of Other
- Governance (0.5%)
- Office Costs (0.2%)
- Generating Income (0.1%)
ACRE would like to thank the following organisations for their support:

Allied Westminster
ansvar.insurance
Bates Wells
booking spaces

Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs
hallmaster
Nationwide Foundation
Norris & Fisher Insurance Brokers Ltd

the phone coop
Plunkett Foundation
SPORT ENGLAND

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