

AFFORDABLE ENERGY IN RURAL ENGLAND:

A CASE STUDY FROM THE ACRE NETWORK



Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) is the national charity for rural communities. We work closely with our Network of 38 member charities who work with communities in rural areas across England. Together we campaign for change, enable local action, and improve support for people most in need.

To communicate the full breadth of our mission and impact, we have produced a series of thematic case studies. This case study looks at the contribution made by the **ACRE** Network to the affordable energy agenda in rural communities.



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AFFORDABLE ENERGY

The challenges around affordable energy in rural England are set out below:

- **High Energy Costs:** Rural England faces disproportionate energy burdens, despite perceptions of affluence.
- **Off-Grid Reliance:** 31% of properties in rural constituencies are off the gas grid; 945,000 homes use costly fuels (oil, LPG, solid) which are 20–50% more expensive than mains gas (Defra 2025).
- **Fuel Poverty:** Rural fuel poverty gap is £668 (nearly double urban); affects 12.3% of rural households vs. 11.0% urban.
- **Inefficient Housing:** 40% of rural stock is at EPC Band D or below, increasing heating needs; rural incomes are 15% lower, yet living costs are higher due to dispersal and transport poverty.
- **Health & Economic Impacts:** 20% higher excess winter deaths; more respiratory illnesses; £860m annual NHS costs from cold/damp homes (PHE 2024).
- **Broader Effects:** Poorer energy security, higher emissions, increased isolation, and strained local economies.
- **Key Driver:** Substandard, inefficient, or unaffordable housing amplifies energy disparities



NETWORK RESPONSE

Many **ACRE** Network members are actively engaged in responding to these issues. Access to affordable energy, delivered with strong community involvement, is increasingly recognised as vital for strengthening rural resilience. This is a key area of activity across much of the **ACRE** Network.

Relevant interventions include supporting access to good quality affordable housing, working with partners to deliver energy advice, warm hubs and retrofit schemes, and our work to support community renewables and bulk fuel purchasing. In many areas we have piloted energy projects and influenced policy on rural energy inequalities.



KEY EXAMPLES

Three examples of the work of Network members, which exemplify our impact are set out below:

In Northumberland, England's most sparsely populated county, **Community Action Northumberland (CAN)** tackles fuel poverty and off-grid challenges through integrated advice, retrofit and renewable projects (2023–2025 and beyond). Funded by Energy Redress, National Lottery and Defra grants, programmes have delivered trusted advice to over 2,000 households, installed 86 PV systems and 79 heat pumps, and saved significant CO₂ and costs. Ongoing initiatives include CAIRN (2024–2028), Powering People (2025–2027) and the North East Warmer Homes Scheme, plus

support for Northumberland Community Energy Ltd, which by 2025 completed 11 community solar and battery installations. An interim evaluation shows high social returns through reduced bills and emissions and, improved resilience.

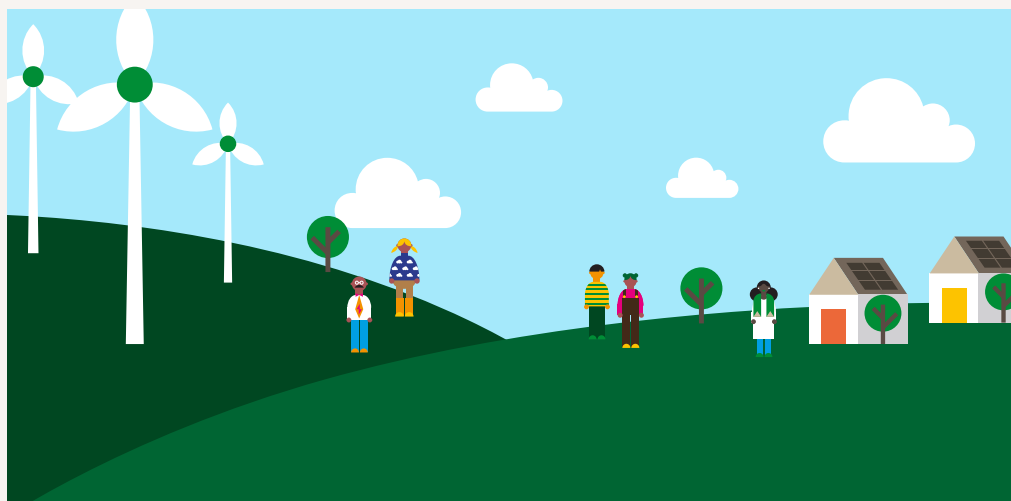
Similarly, **Devon Communities Together's** Energy Outreach Project, funded by Citizens Advice, provides tailored one-to-one energy advice and referrals for vulnerable rural residents. In 2024–2025, it exceeded targets, advising 292 individuals via drop-ins at libraries, warm hubs and food banks, in partnership with housing associations and others. Casework includes signposting to the Priority Services Register and financial support, and helping people manage arrears and health-related issues while cutting energy use.

Cambridgeshire ACRE demonstrates the vital housing–energy link by facilitating new, highly efficient rural affordable homes that directly reduce energy costs and fuel poverty. The 2024 Harston Road project in Newton delivered eight top-tier energy-rated affordable units (EPC A), equipped with air-source heat pumps, solar arrays and advanced insulation. Stemming from a 2019 Housing Needs Survey (35% response rate and 75% community support), the homes provide tenants with significantly lower energy bills, warmer living conditions and village centre locations that cut transport needs. By keeping families and key workers in the community, the project also sustains the local volunteer base for energy advice and community schemes, while preventing reliance on emergency fuel support and contributing to broader rural resilience.

BROADER OVERVIEW

Below we give a brief overview of the actions of members across the whole **ACRE** Network against the key aspects of the rural affordable energy agenda supported by Defra funding (and in some cases other sources):

- **Energy Poverty & Access: Cambridgeshire ACRE's** Home Energy Support Service advised 291 off-grid households and issued crisis payments and referrals.
- **Energy Efficiency & Retrofit: Community First Oxfordshire** conducted 150 home energy assessments and signposted to ECO4 grants. **Thrive Somerset** provided 30 funded audits for community buildings, supporting 50 green jobs.
- **Community-led Solutions: Community Action Suffolk's** digital inclusion programme distributed refurbished laptops and trained residents in online energy management.
- **Policy & Infrastructure: Community First Yorkshire** leveraged £69,720 for energy projects and advocated rural priorities in forums.



CONCLUSION

The **ACRE** Network's community-led initiatives directly support key themes in the Government's affordable energy policy for rural England. These approaches support place-based planning partnerships with local authorities and other agencies in many rural areas, whilst addressing the housing-energy link. They can be summarised against 4 key themes:

- **Delivering energy advice and efficiency measures in community settings:** **ACRE** members run advice sessions, audits and retrofit programmes that reach off-grid and vulnerable households, reducing bills, emissions and health risks from cold homes.
- **Improving access to support in sparse areas:** Through warm hubs, drop-ins at trusted venues and partnerships with housing providers, members help rural residents receive advice and practical measures where they live.
- **Engaging seldom-heard groups and using community voice to shape services:** Initiatives target private renters, off-grid households and those facing digital exclusion, ensuring solutions fit diverse rural needs.
- **Building local capacity and influencing policy:** **ACRE** members support community renewables, train volunteers, advocate for rural-proofing and share evidence of what works, helping embed successful models in national guidance.

THESE CONTRIBUTIONS FOCUS ON SUPPORTING DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITY ASSETS AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING, DIRECTLY SUPPORTING THE SHIFT TO AFFORDABLE, LOW-CARBON RURAL ENERGY AND REDUCING ENERGY INEQUALITIES.