

RURAL ECONOMY IN 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 the **ACRE** Network, 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.

This case study looks at our collective contribution to influencing policy and directly addressing the challenges associated with the Rural Economy by the **ACRE** Network.



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RURAL ECONOMY

- **Economic Contribution:** Rural England covers 80% of land, supports 9.3 million people, and generates £246bn GVA (16% nationally).
- **Strengths:** Higher employment rates (78.4% vs. 75.3% urban) and better business survival rates; dominated by micro-enterprises.
- **Challenges:** Lower productivity, fewer start-ups than urban areas, and higher economic inactivity (19.4%), linked to the older population and infrastructure gaps.
- **Barriers:** Sparse geography, poor connectivity, digital exclusion, inadequate transport, high energy costs, and closures of banks, post offices, and shops.
- **Hidden Issues:** “Hidden” deprivation in remote areas (per FSB 2024 report), leading to lower wages, reduced business growth, higher inactivity among working-age people, and strained community services.
- **Key Driver:** Acute shortage of affordable housing — often insecure, overcrowded, or unaffordable — pushing away young families and key workers, reducing local spending power.

ACRE NETWORK RESPONSE

This is the core territory of the **ACRE** Network.

Key actions include:

- our work to support community-owned assets
- business advice and social enterprise development,
- supporting access to good-quality affordable housing for the rural workforce, and
- working with partners to deliver transport schemes to get local people to work, education or training.

In many areas, we have piloted economic interventions and influenced policy on rural growth and productivity.



KEY EXAMPLES

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

Devon Communities Together's East Devon VCSE Support Service (launched 2023, funded by Defra's Local Action Grant and local partners) provides training, networking, funding guidance and one-to-one support to voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. From April to September 2025, it supported 19 new and 39 existing social enterprises, delivered 101 training places and created 10 new organisations. An interim SROI report recorded £8.50 social value for every £1 invested and a net present value of £650,000. The approach is expanding via the 2025–2026 Financial Resilience Pilot.

In Wasdale, a Lake District valley of around 100 residents hosting 250,000 annual visitors, **ACTion with Communities in Cumbria**



launched the Wasdale Community Panel in 2024 (funded by Defra's Local Action Grant and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation). Deliberative sessions addressed parking, litter and infrastructure pressures while protecting tourism livelihoods. An interim evaluation (November 2025) found £7.20 in social value for every £1 invested and a £450,000 net present value, with outcomes including an ongoing working group, stronger relationships and exploration of co-designed access systems. The model is now expanding through the 2025–26 Community Inquiry project, training 150 residents in other visitor-pressured areas.

Durham Community Action (DCA) supports people to live and work in rural areas. In 2025, it established the Rural Housing Advisory Group (RHAG) to strengthen the Rural Housing Enabler programme, bringing together planners, policymakers, housing associations, landowners and Homes England. The group pools expertise to take a coordinated, long-term approach to rural housing, facilitated by DCA. RHAG identified limited land availability and low uptake of Rural Exception Sites as key issues, with open discussion revealing that the existing RES policy was not working for non-profit developers. As a result, planners are exploring S106 agreements and planning in principle to reduce costs and risk, underpinned by a shared understanding of rural housing's role in a living, working countryside.

BROADER OVERVIEW

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

Employment & Labour Market

- **Community First Wiltshire & Swindon** operates 43 volunteer-led Link schemes providing over 50,000 journeys annually, increasing employment access by 22%.
Support Staffordshire's Move More project created micro-enterprises in bike maintenance, raising self-employment transitions by 15%.



Earnings & Wages

- **Community Impact Bucks** delivered rural business grants, increasing average earnings by 18% for recipients.

Business Demographics & Dynamics

- **Community Action Norfolk** supported six new community businesses and heritage networks. **ACTion with Communities in Cumbria** helped form creative hubs employing four people and a vegetable box delivery business creating eight jobs.

Economic Output & Productivity

- **RCAN (Nottinghamshire)** secured broadband for village halls, enabling 12 micro-businesses to go online and adding £1,200 GVA per job. **Community Action Norfolk's** B2B networks secured £200,000 in contracts and created 45 jobs.

Policy & Opportunity

- **Rural Action Derbyshire** has published in-depth research and case studies on digital inclusion, including submitting evidence to the House of Lords Communications & Digital Select Committee.

CONCLUSION

The **ACRE** Network's community-led initiatives directly support key themes in the Government's rural economic policy for England. These approaches respond to recognised challenges around connectivity, productivity and deprivation while addressing the housing-economy link. They can be summarised against 4 key themes:

- **Delivering business support and skills** in community settings **ACRE** members run training, networking, and grant programmes that help micro-enterprises and social enterprises start up and grow, creating jobs and raising earnings.
- **Improving access to opportunities in sparse areas** Through volunteer transport, broadband projects and local hubs, members help rural residents reach work, training and markets.
- **Engaging seldom-heard groups and using community voice to shape services** Initiatives target young people, isolated communities and visitor-pressured areas, ensuring economic solutions fit diverse rural needs.
- **Building local capacity and influencing policy** **ACRE** members support community-owned assets, train volunteers, advocate for rural-proofing and share evidence of what works, helping embed successful models in national guidance.

THESE CONTRIBUTIONS FOCUS ON COMMUNITY ASSETS, PARTNERSHIP WORKING AND SUSTAINABILITY, DIRECTLY SUPPORTING THRIVING, FAIRER RURAL ECONOMIES AND REDUCING ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES.