



Speaking up for rural communities

People turn places into communities; we provide practical help enabling rural communities to be inclusive, resilient and to have a voice.

We believe that nobody living in a rural area should be unreasonably disadvantaged by where they live. The best way to achieve this is for government and rural people to work together, making the most effective use of community resources and the allocation of a fair proportion of public spending to meet this legitimate expectation.

Rural areas are recovering from the coronavirus pandemic and preparing for a future outside the EU. We ask Government to help us give practical support to all communities in rural England so they can emerge as places:

- ...where everyone can play a full part in their community;
- ...where there is affordable housing for every generation;
- ...where people receive the care they need, whatever their circumstances;
- ...where there is opportunity for all, especially those starting out in life;
- ...where the local economy enables everyone to contribute to their full potential;
- ...where people consciously live within their environmental limits;
- ...that are connected to each other and the world;
- ...that are generous, welcoming and inclusive,
- ...that are fully engaged in the UK's future policies and ambitions.

The 'golden thread' running through all our work is ensuring that there is a place for the next generation in rural communities, and helping rural people thrive in a future that is genuinely sustainable.

ACRE is the national charity that speaks up for rural communities. Through our 38 local members we offer support to all rural communities in England.

1. Rural places where everyone can play a full part in their community

We call on Government to:

Support a renaissance in rural community life by devolving genuine power, responsibility and budgets to local rural communities whilst also ensuring that all have access to practical help, advice and support.

Ensure rural areas are fully engaged and represented in local / regional devolution and any re-organisation of local government, so that decisions can be taken as close as possible to the communities that are affected by them.

We ask Government to help rural communities achieve this by:

1. Investing in the **ACRE Network's support for rural civil society** at the local level through support, advice, training and creation/retention of community owned assets. Programme delivered by the ACRE Network in each of 38 rural areas of England.
2. Funding additional support from the Network to **rural civil society throughout the devolution/local government re-organisation** process from 2021/24
3. Continue the **Village Hall Improvement Grant** programme through to 2020/24

ACRE national priorities and partnerships to support rural civil society

The ACRE Network will champion best practice in the management of community buildings through its extensive Information Service. It will also seek to develop ways of making this unique and valuable support to community owned assets more resilient and accessible to all community groups that need it. We will promote the distinctive place-based nature of rural civil society through all our policy and communications activities whilst also seeking ways to give more support across the Network to new and emerging voluntary and mutual aid groups.

We will work with DEFRA to develop stronger relationships across Whitehall to help deliver better outcomes for rural people especially with DDCMS, NLCF, MHCLG and DHSC. We will also extend our existing close working with key national civil society organisations such as NCVO, NAVCA, NALC and the emerging organisation Engage Britain.

Local ACRE Network delivery examples / potential initiatives

Locally our 38 Members will seek to develop support for rural civil society alongside local government and other local VCS organisations. Priorities are the management of community owned assets, meeting the needs of vulnerable people, supporting local action to achieve net-zero and helping rural communities to become fully engaged in local decision making, especially with local government and local NHS organisations.

The Network reaches into every corner of rural England delivering services appropriate to their local area but in the main made up of a mix of:

- Advice/support to community buildings and their Trustees
- Consultation / engagement support
- Community resilience initiatives
- Volunteer development
- Funding advice

2. Rural places where there is affordable housing for every generation

We call on Government to:

Provide opportunities for future generations to live and thrive in rural areas, whilst also providing housing for current generations as they age. To achieve this, rural places must be allowed to grow to meet the needs of all sections of the local community through housing that is affordable in relation to local incomes. Priority must be given to policy-led development that contributes to the long-term sustainability and net-zero potential of the whole community in which it is built.

We ask Government to help rural communities achieve this by:

Making substantial investment in locally led housing that is affordable to people working locally, including the infrastructure to go with it. Investment must include the locally delivered, hands-on support that communities need to take the lead. This should include rural exception sites, supported by positive Local Plan policies.

Ensuring that all village communities, especially smaller ones and those located in environmentally protected areas, are entitled under the planning system to affordable housing provided, on site, from any open market development.

Affordable housing delivery should open up opportunities for young people and local businesses in zero-carbon technologies. Its design should be energy efficient and inclusive responding to climate change, combatting fuel poverty and readied for ageing rural populations.

ACRE national priorities and partnerships to house future generations in rural communities

We have strong relationships with many key rural housing organisations including the Rural Housing Alliance and rural specialist housing providers such as Hastoe and English Rural. We will maintain these relationships and seek common cause with them. We will also seek to develop further positive relationships with charitable foundations such as Nationwide.

We will continue to represent the interests of those at risk of being excluded from rural areas through a lack of affordable housing to Government by all means possible.

Local ACRE Network delivery examples / potential initiatives

Members of the ACRE Network have championed the need for affordable housing in rural areas for over thirty years. Many of our members provide the first and essential source of independent advice to enable rural communities to take the lead on developing local affordable housing schemes. **Rural Housing Enablers** have been key to achieving the small schemes that are now, in many villages, the only source of affordable rented housing in the village. Maintaining and developing this support is a high priority for the Network at local level.

3. Rural places where people receive the care they need, whatever their circumstances

We call on Government to:

Ensure that financial allocations for NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups and Social Care Authorities better reflect the care demands faced by an ageing rural population.

As the UK leaves the EU, and therefore its procurement requirements, ensure that local commissioning decisions are driven by collaboration and co-operation with local communities and social care providers rather than by large-scale, competitive, contracting.

We ask Government to help rural communities achieve this by:

Investing in a **Rural Shared Outcomes Fund** to help commissioners and providers of public services find synergies between services that will improve outcomes, create non-cashable savings and exploit economies of scope in rural areas. To be managed by DEFRA as a central plank of its governmental Rural Affairs brief.

ACRE national priorities and partnerships over community health and care services

We support the Rural Services Network's campaign for a fair funding formula for rural areas and will actively seek alliances with research and other institutions to inform both ourselves and others about the needs of rural people.

In particular we will actively encourage others to use alternatives to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and other means of assessing need that are intrinsically weighted to urban areas but are highly influential in the allocation of resources for health and care. We will work with Engage Britain and the Rural Health and Care Alliance to promote better understanding of **rural dimension to delivery of health and social care** services.

We will aim to develop relationships with the Department of Health and Social Care over '**rural proofing**' of national strategy and rural representation in key health and care for a such as the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Alliance on health and care.

Local ACRE Network delivery examples / potential initiatives

Many public services target the same clients, from supported housing to help back to work, from mental health services to helping vulnerable people with online access. **Village Agents** schemes, run by many ACRE Network members cover rural clusters of communities on behalf of multiple public service agencies and are more efficient, more effective and deliver measurably better outcomes. A Shared Outcomes pilot in each area could demonstrate effectiveness and can lead to long term commitment out of mainstream budgets.

A good example of the ACRE Network's work in this area is a project run by Rural Action Derbyshire that is directly addressing food poverty. **Feeding Derbyshire** seeks to help those struggling with low incomes, debt and poor access to affordable, nutritious food. It aims to reduce the negative impact of hunger by working to ensure our projects are inclusive and reach the most vulnerable people in the county.

4. Rural places where there is opportunity for all, especially those starting out in life

We call on Government to:

Ensure that wherever young people are growing up in England, irrespective of their rurality or distance from major centres of population, they will have the fair access to a world class education, access to wider personal development opportunities, choice in post-16 education and avenues for local employment.

We ask Government to help rural communities achieve this by:

Investment in a comprehensive rural transport network, including flexible and innovative schemes such as Wheels to Work and Education, that can ensure that **no rural young person is unreasonably disadvantaged in their access to education** compared to their peers growing up in any of the UK's major cities

Actively promote opportunities for employment and housing for young people. These opportunities are needed in both emerging 'cutting edge' rural businesses and in the rural social / foundation sectors of the economy.

ACRE national priorities and partnerships to support young people growing up in rural areas

ACRE will seek to build relationships with expert organisations such as the Children's Society and the Co-op Foundation in order to raise the profile of exclusion, lack of access and vulnerability amongst rural young people. In doing so we will explore ways in which long term changes to policy can make it more attractive to young people to stay living in and contributing to rural communities.

We will work with young people and organisations representing them to enable us to take a stronger hand in championing the interests of those growing up in the countryside whenever is a danger of them being forgotten or left behind.

Local ACRE Network delivery examples / potential initiatives

The **Building Bridges programme** is the local implementation of Building Better Opportunities across Swindon and Wiltshire. The local focus for the programme is on supporting those furthest from the labour market in accessing the skills, development, education and/or experience they need to achieve and sustain ongoing employment. The target group is those who are unemployed or economically inactive and facing multiple, complex challenges and barriers. Participation in the programme is entirely voluntary and free to users.

5. Rural places where the local economy makes it possible for everyone to reach their full potential

We call on Government to:

*Ensure that every agency charged with economic development in a local area (LEP, Mayoral Authority, Combined Authority) fully engage with rural areas to **strengthening emerging local rural/market town economies**, address the needs of those growing up in them and consolidate world-class digital connectivity.*

*Enable rural areas to be more resilient to crises including **diversifying the rural economy** and community away from over-dependence on the visitor economy and the land-based sector and into a range of new business activities.*

We ask Government to help rural communities achieve this by:

Ensure that the **UK Shared Prosperity Fund** is used to support rural development in proportion to the share of the UK population living and working in rural areas.

A significant portion of the resources that were previously administered through EU programmes should be allocated in each County to **community-led initiatives** to fund collaborative projects involving both local communities and local land-based businesses.

Ensure that the **UK's Food Strategy** explicitly addresses poor access and affordability of good quality food in rural areas where the major food retailers have poor reach, but significant influence over supply chains.

ACRE national priorities and partnerships to diversify the local rural economy

ACRE will promote the principle of an England/UK national rural **LEADER/CLLD network** as has existed in the past for community led socio-economic rural development. We will take the initiative in offering to host and co-operate this network with the other UK nations.

We will aim to broaden our engagement within DEFRA to include community **engagement over food and farming strategies**.

We will assist the ACRE Network in **reducing the over-dependence of rural areas on a narrow economic base** and will aim to work more closely with BEIS and MHCLG to support our Network in helping to achieve this.

Work with Plunkett and other champions of the community role in business, such as the School for Social Entrepreneurs, to promote the role of **community led business** and their contribution to rural areas.

Local ACRE Network delivery examples / potential initiatives

Members of the ACRE Network have supported LEADER programmes over the years and, in many cases, acted as both the local managing agents of local action groups and administrators of their grants schemes. A good example is Cambridgeshire ACRE who have been at the heart of the Cambridgeshire Fens LEADER programme. In March 2015, Defra announced that the Cambridgeshire Fens LEADER LAG had been awarded £1.45m to deliver a new four year programme aimed at helping local businesses, farmers, land managers and communities to create jobs and growth, mainly via small grants.

Members of the ACRE Network are well placed to act as honest broker and managing agent of local LEADER or Community Led Local Development (CLLD) programmes.

6. Rural places where people consciously live within their environmental limits

We call on Government to:

*Commit to achieving **carbon net zero targets through a 'just transition'** especially in relation to mobility and fuel poverty. Investment to achieve the goal must bring new economic opportunities to rural areas where carbon sequestration and development of low carbon fuels as well as other reduction initiatives are possible.*

We ask Government to help rural communities achieve this by:

Investing in training, R&D, incentivising commercial investment and promoting new careers in sunrise net-zero industries in rural areas. This must be done within rural areas where new carbon sequestering industries have the scope to develop.

Funding a national programme, devolved down to local areas, to support all rural communities to work with local employers, landowners and the public sector to develop community level 'net-zero' strategies. This must include nationally consistent guidelines on measuring contribution to net-zero in order to enable aggregating up to be possible.

ACRE national priorities and partnerships to achieve net-zero

Rural areas have sometimes, mistakenly, been seen as 'unsustainable' due to recent generations' dependence on the private car. Now they can lead the way in reducing carbon emissions, building a new economy around removing carbon from the atmosphere and creating local 'net-zero' strategies. The ACRE Network is ready to mobilise its 100 years of experience working with rural communities, and its extensive community networks ensure rural areas get access to the help they need. We are especially keen to work with UKCCC, The Energy Saving Trust, End Fuel Poverty Coalition and other NGOs through Greener UK and with industry and land management organisations to achieve this.

ACRE has been developing its own commitment and policies to achieving net-zero in rural communities and, in recent months, has been seeking to learn lessons from the experience of CV-19 in rural areas. We are determined to help rural communities adapt to net-zero through their experience of greater home-working, re-discovery of local supply chains and revitalisation of place-communities that has taken place in early 2020.

Local ACRE Network delivery examples / potential initiatives

There are win-wins both for rural people and rural communities when it comes to reducing energy use and moving towards net-zero. **Dorset Community Action** provides advice to individuals, communities and voluntary groups through projects designed to help vulnerable people get the right information and to understand their options. With this knowledge they can take action to keep their homes warm more affordably. The delivery of the project would not be possible without the support of the following funders: Department of Energy & Climate Change, British Gas Energy Trust, and partners: Citizens' Advice in Dorset (CAID), Magna Housing Association, Wyvern Savings & Loans, Age UK Dorset and Dorset AONB.

7. Rural places that are connected to each other and the world

We call on Government to:

Ensure that all households, businesses and other organisations not only have access to world-class digital connectivity but also at a cost they can afford.

Ensure that this affordable connectivity is in place for all rural people before taking forward further 'digital by default' initiatives within either central or local government.

Ensure that all rural areas are within reach of any digital connectivity that is required for the operation of new generations of Connected and Autonomous Vehicles that may form part of the UK's zero carbon strategy.

We ask Government to help rural communities achieve this by:

Delivering its pre-election commitment to provide **full-fibre broadband**, or its equivalent, to every rural premise and to do so at no greater cost than the market provides in urban areas.

Delivering on the promise of the **Shared Rural Network** to ensure that all rural areas are connected to 4G and, as the technology develops, have a pathway to access the benefits of 5G to the same extent as urban areas.

ACRE national priorities and partnerships to bring the benefits of greater connectivity to rural communities

The ACRE Network aims to work closely with key academic institutions through the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise to develop learning about how greater connectivity can enable rural communities to thrive and the rural economy to diversify. Much of the thinking about how 'instant' connectivity will transform communities is based on urban models and ACRE will seek to work with the Connected Communities Catapult to transfer this thinking into rural areas.

It is now possible to commit to living and working in a local rural community/economy whilst also connecting to the world. In rural areas there is a 'carbon-neutral' virtuous circle that reduces travel, encourages local enterprise and builds both health and quality of life. This is, however, highly dependent of fair access to the best quality connectivity. ACRE will develop its practice and policies to highlight this virtual circle that could bring economic and well-being benefits in tandem with reduction of the carbon footprint of rural communities and ensure communities have access to the skills and resources to make a 'just transition' possible

Local ACRE Network delivery examples / potential initiatives

ACRE Network member **Community Action Norfolk** has set up ThinkingWISP to serve its rural areas. This is a next generation Wireless Internet Service provided by a partnership of Norfolk based organisations. Community Action Norfolk, AF Affinity and InTouch Systems have come together to provide communities with fast, reliable broadband connections. Building on the success of the pilot service they are continuing to expand their network and are now able to provide high quality broadband to even more homes and businesses.

8. Rural places that are generous, welcoming and inclusive

We call on both Government and ourselves:

We believe that Government has a leadership role in driving out unequal treatment towards anyone from a minority community who experiences long term and systematic discrimination within the UK.

We, the ACRE Network, will play our part. We are aware that rural communities can appear 'monocultural' or dominated by those who are older, asset-rich or have even chosen where they live in order to distance themselves from wider, multi-cultural, society. We will use our best endeavours to ensure that the voices of those from minority communities who live within rural areas are heard, and that respect and mutual understanding become an essential feature of rural community life.

We can and must ensure that people are neither disadvantaged by the rural location where they live nor discriminated against for any other reasons.

We ask Government to help rural communities achieve this by:

Put in place a campaign to actively **retain/create a diverse rural population** with opportunities for young people and other parts of the wider community who are under-represented in rural communities. This should especially focus on new industries related to the achievement of carbon net-zero and the foundation economy of rural areas.

ACRE policies and practice

Nobody living in a rural area should be unreasonably disadvantaged by where they live, whether by service planning that is urban centric, reluctance to factor in distance costs or failure to engage rural people over appropriate service design. This principle needs to be given legal force and a mechanism for intervention. ACRE is actively reviewing its rural equalities policy and also identifying ways in which the network can support rural communities over wider inequality issues and work with others over this.

Development of initiatives and services at a national and local level within the Network

We will seek to put our principles into practice by establishing programmes of action to achieve the following:

- Create an ACRE Network project that will create a pipeline of younger, more diverse and locally connected voices as spokespeople for rural community issues.
- Work with partners to support the delivery of affordable housing schemes based on an assessment of local needs which aim to make rural communities more open, inclusive and diverse.
- Identify specific rural factors that may disproportionately affect the wide range of people from minority communities living in rural areas and work with them to find ways of mitigating these factors. Eg. Migrant workers, residents from minority communities, settled travellers etc..
- Work with others, such as the National Parks, to promote deeper action, beyond just visitor initiatives, that promote greater understanding and mutual respect between urban minority groups and rural communities.

9. Rural places that are fully engaged in the UK's future policies and ambitions.

We call on Government to:

*Work with rural people, communities and the organisations that represent them, to articulate a clear **vision for the future of rural England** consistent with the asks set out above.*

*Put back into legislation 'rural proofing', integrated rural development, links into agri-environment policy and food strategy and ensure post-EU investment in rural development beyond just agri-environment / ELMs measures. This may need a **'Rural Communities Bill'** to sit alongside the Agriculture and Environment Bills.*

*Give greater national priority, across all areas of Government, to **levelling-up the opportunities for all** in rural and coastal areas of England*

*Give the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Competition and Markets Authority and the Commission for Social Mobility duties to keep under review **unequal treatment of people arising directly from the rurality of their location**, or where rurality exacerbates unequal treatment arising from the protected characteristics enshrined in Equalities legislation*

Partnerships to promote the potential of rural areas as living, working and thriving places

We will provide a secretariat for the Rural Coalition and work with its members to promote a strong unified view of the major contribution that rural areas can make to the national scene. We will seek the fair treatment that 17% of the population who live there deserve. We will be non-partisan in taking our views into the political arena and will seek to influence MPs, Members of the House of Lords and Political Parties about the concerns of rural communities.