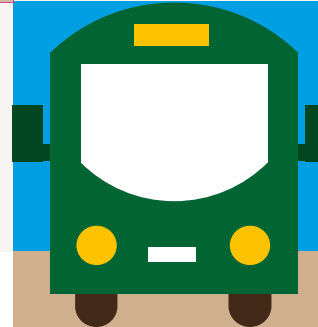
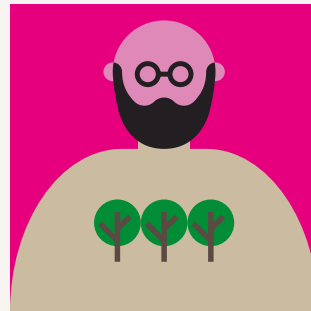
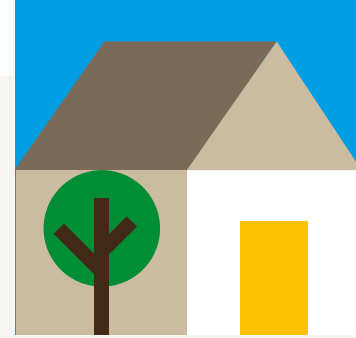


Rural Ambition: enabling communities to thrive

Our strategy for 2025-30

**Action with Communities
in Rural England**



ACRE: The voice of rural communities

Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) is the national charity for rural communities. We champion thriving, sustainable, inclusive communities that have the services and the resources they need to secure equitable outcomes for everyone.

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. We engage with government and other national partners to explore the issues affecting rural communities and identify solutions so that no one is disadvantaged by where they live.

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ACRE in numbers



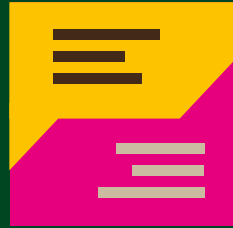
The ACRE Network reaches over

28,000

community groups and organisations and leverages over

£40 million

of funding annually.



In 2024/25 ACRE contributed to over

20

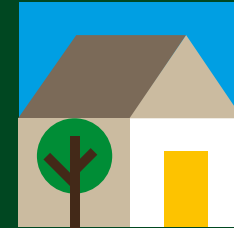
policy consultations and parliamentary inquiries to ensure the voice of rural communities was heard.



In 2024/25 ACRE distributed over

£4.5 million

of government grants to our network and the rural communities they support.



Our village halls advice service is available to over

10,000

community buildings in rural communities across England.

Welcome to our strategy

ACRE is the only national charity speaking up for rural communities as a whole and this gives us a unique perspective. Our vision is for rural communities that are thriving, inclusive and sustainable, with the support they need to ensure equitable outcomes for everyone. We also believe they have a vital part to play in helping to address some of the most significant challenges facing everyone in society, wherever they live, including the need to increase growth to fund high quality services, promote a just and effective transition to net zero and deliver the urgent restoration of the natural world.

ACRE's origins can be traced back over a century to the foundation of the first Rural Community Councils. Part of the wider movement for social change which emerged from the First World War, they were established to provide opportunities for returning veterans and their families and address the significant hardship facing many rural communities. Over time similar organisations were established in every rural county in England and today they form the ACRE Network. Together they share a

commitment to improve the wellbeing of people in rural communities, and especially those in greatest need as a result of where they live.

ACRE is the national champion for the network. Since we began work forty years ago, we have brought together our members' collective experience of the issues facing rural communities to influence public policy development and make the case for equitable rural community development. Our members are embedded in rural communities and through them we are able to maximise impact on the ground. Our ability to draw on their expertise and reach also means we can quickly see new trends emerging and understand the impact national changes will have on local communities.

Our new strategy for 2025-30, *Rural Ambition: enabling communities to thrive*, builds on the successes of the last five years. We worked with our members throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to support rural communities. We commissioned research, contributed extensively to policy making and helped to ensure new legislation



“We champion thriving, sustainable, inclusive rural communities that have the services and the resources they need to secure equitable outcomes for everyone.”

“We believe that rural communities have a vital part to play in helping to address some of the most significant challenges facing everyone in society today.”



took account of rural issues. We set out our recommendations for the new government in May 2024 in *No Rural Communities Left Behind*¹. We have managed the Platinum Jubilee Village Halls fund on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) since its launch in 2022, distributing £2.7m of funding so far. We also work with our network to deliver the Rural Housing Enabler Programme, also funded by Defra, to help provide affordable rural homes that meet local needs.

Rural Ambition is designed to deliver our vision with renewed focus and energy. It builds on the last five years but also marks a change in focus and pace. Our strategy is published at a time of immense economic, societal and environmental flux, but is optimistic and ambitious because we believe there are opportunities as well as unresolved challenges.

We will focus on the most important issues facing rural communities, speaking up more boldly, building new alliances and working more actively with our network to make an even greater impact. We are also clear that we need to be a resilient organisation if we are going to be successful and the collective power of our network is essential to achieving our goals.

We hope you will be inspired by our ambition and that you will join with us to unlock the potential of rural communities.

James Blake

Chair

Corinne Pluchino

Chief Executive

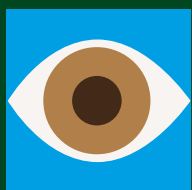


¹ *No Rural Communities Left Behind* ACRE May 2024

ACRE is dedicated to rural communities

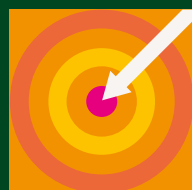
The need

Thriving rural communities improve the quality of life of their residents and support those most in need. However, rural areas are often poorly understood and ignored in policy development. As a result they have inequitable access to essential infrastructure, services and jobs, making it harder for people to secure the resources and support they need and realise the potential of the rural economy. We want to change this.



Our vision for the future

Rural communities that are thriving, inclusive and sustainable, with the support they need to ensure equitable outcomes for everyone.



The impact we will have

Rural communities will be thriving, inclusive and adaptable to change, improving individual wellbeing and quality of life.

Our purpose

ACRE exists to achieve positive change for people living in rural communities, and particularly those facing the greatest needs and challenges because of where they live. We achieve this by:

Campaigning for rural communities

Enabling local action

Unlocking support for people most in need



Understanding the landscape: rural realities today

Rural areas are often perceived as being idyllic places to live and work but in reality the picture is much more complex. Ten million people live in the English countryside but these communities are poorly understood. They are often assumed to be synonymous with farming and food production but the facts are very different. Fewer than one in ten of them work in agriculture, forestry or fishing. The biggest employers are in fact public administration, education, health and social care, and retail.²

Rural areas are not homogeneous and just like urban neighbourhoods they are shaped by their history, landscape and the people that live there. As in our towns and cities, there are areas of affluence but these can mask real deprivation. In addition, many rural communities face a common set of daily challenges as a result of where they live. They often have inequitable access to essential infrastructure, services and employment and public policy frequently fails to

take the features and difficulties of rural areas into account. Our network has identified the top five challenges rural residents face: affordable housing, transport and communications connectivity, access to public services (particularly healthcare), isolation and loneliness, and energy and the transition to net zero.

In addition, rural communities are at the forefront of some of the most fundamental changes to our economy and way of life that will take place over the next 25 years. As we transition to net zero, for example, large-scale renewable energy generation projects, and the distribution networks needed to carry energy from them to our towns and cities, will largely be located in rural areas. People living in market towns, villages and isolated communities will also be at the sharp end of efforts to achieve a balance between building housing and other critical national infrastructure, nationally efficient food production and restoring the natural world.

Housing is less affordable in rural areas than in urban areas for low income households.³



The rural fuel poverty gap is **double** that in towns and cities.⁵

It takes **twice as long** on average to travel to hospital in rural areas as in urban areas.⁶

“Rural areas are often perceived as idyllic places to live and work but in reality the picture is much more complex.”

Rural communities are facing a complex combination of opportunities and challenges set against a background of rapid change and global uncertainty. It is essential that their voices can be heard – and have influence – as decisions are made about economic, social and environmental policy. In addition, there is enormous untapped potential for the future. In fact, a recent report estimated that with the right policies, rural economies could achieve significantly increased productivity and growth and create an additional £9-19 billion per year in tax revenue.⁴ **The next five years presents a chance to seize the initiative and achieve lasting and positive change for rural communities. Our strategy is designed to help deliver that change.**



² Statistical Digest of Rural England: 7 – Rural Economic Bulletin Defra and Government Statistical Service April 2025

³ Rural Life Monitor 2024 National Housing Federation July 2024

⁴ Reigniting Rural Futures Pragmatix Advisory – A Report for The Rural Coalition May 2024

⁵ Statistical Digest of Rural England: 8 – Energy Defra and Government Statistical Service May 2025

⁶ APPG Rural Health & Care and National Centre for Rural Health and Care Inquiry Overview February 2022

Our ambitions for 2030 and how we will deliver them



In order to achieve our long-term vision, and have the impact we want to make, we have set ourselves a clear overarching ambition for the next five years.

By 2030 we will have helped to improve the quality of life for rural communities and supported those in greatest need.

There will be positive economic, social and environmental changes for rural communities. There will be more housing available that is appropriate, sustainable and affordable so that young families can remain in the areas where they grew up and local businesses are able to recruit and expand. Essential power and communications infrastructure will be improving so it is more reliable and resilient, and can support future technological innovation so that rural communities can benefit in full.

More people will be confident using digital technology to access essential services and

make new connections to help address isolation. Rural communities will be recognised for the contribution they make to the transition to a net zero economy and supporting nature's restoration. New resources will be available to help local people improve the facilities and services available in their communities, which meet their needs and help them to unlock their future potential.

We will assess our progress by monitoring the economic, social and environmental progress being made which has been identified as helping to transition to a “good countryside”.⁷

“There will be positive economic, social and environmental changes for rural communities.”

⁷ Shucksmith, M. (2018). *Re-imagining the rural: From rural idyll to Good Countryside*. Journal of Rural Studies, 59, pp.163-172.

Our ambition for 2030

We will have helped improve the quality of life for rural communities and supported those in greatest need.

How we will achieve it

We will
Campaign

We will
Enable

We will
Unlock

The pillars that support our work

A resilient organisation

A strong network

Increased profile

Working in partnership

In order to deliver our ambition we will focus our external activities in three areas during our strategy period:

Campaigning

We will raise awareness and understanding of rural issues and work to ensure public policies support thriving rural communities.

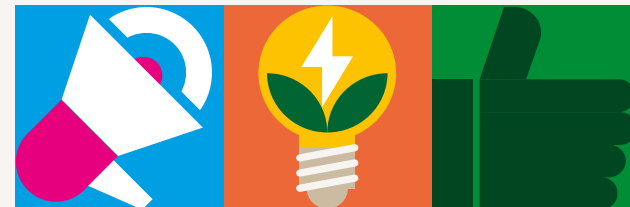
Enabling

We will increase the opportunities for rural communities to make their voice heard and take action to shape their future.

Unlocking

We will ensure equitable access to investment, essential services and opportunities for growth – particularly for those most in need.

Campaigning



By 2030 we will have strengthened our voice and be more widely known as expert advocates for rural communities.

We will have focused on the issues where we can have the most impact, allowing us to build momentum and effect greater change. We will have led new thinking by commissioning research where there are gaps and piloting new initiatives. We will have delivered co-ordinated campaigns with our members combining national and local action, enabling us to reach wider audiences and use our collective power more effectively. We will have continued to work with long-standing partners and built new cross-cutting coalitions in order to reach wider audiences. We will have brought more diverse voices together to discuss, debate and develop positive solutions.



Early priorities

We will:

- focus on the five issues our members have identified as the greatest challenges facing rural communities and which are key to their future growth
- pilot new ways to engage decision makers and increase their understanding about rural communities
- explore the opportunities to work with new partners who share our ambitions so that we can increase our impact
- test a new campaigning approach focused on a priority issue which harnesses the collective power of our network, co-ordinating our national activities with local actions led by our members.

Enabling



We will have increased opportunities for rural communities to make their voice heard and take action to shape their future.

ACRE and its members believe in the power of communities to take action and find solutions, and that a community development approach is fundamental to achieving lasting change. By 2030, we will have encouraged policy makers to engage with communities more effectively, using examples from our network to show what can be achieved. We will have co-designed and piloted new initiatives with our members that will have enabled local communities to speak up and take action. We will have reviewed and developed ACRE's advisory service for village halls and community buildings in partnership with our network, to ensure it meets changing needs and provides easily accessible, high quality and timely support for these vital community assets and social infrastructure.

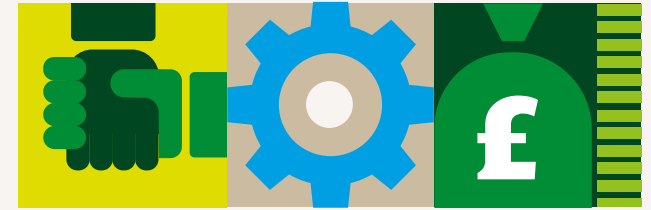


Early priorities

We will:

- build on our work with our members to explore new ways to demonstrate our collective impact and present it in compelling ways to our current partners and potential funders in the future
- prioritise public policy development which creates meaningful opportunities for local communities to make their voice heard and empowers them to take action for themselves
- focus particularly on issues where we can support communities to build their resilience or secure new sources of investment.

Unlocking



We will have ensured more equitable access to investment, essential services and opportunities for growth – particularly for those most in need.

As well as enabling rural communities to take action to help themselves, we also want to ensure that they are achieving equitable access to the investment and essential services available in other areas so that they can also thrive. We will have helped to develop more accurate and informative ways to interpret economic and social data and assess rural need, so that government, funders and other stakeholders use relevant information when making decisions about allocating resources. Using evidence and community-led research, we will have co-designed projects with our network to meet the most urgent needs facing rural communities. We will have linked these projects with our campaigning work so we can build momentum. We will have built new alliances and identified new funders to help us develop, pilot, evaluate and scale up these projects.



Early priorities

We will:

- work with government and other partners to develop and test new ways of interpreting data about the most urgent needs facing rural communities to inform better policy and decision making
- create a process with our members for prioritising, scoping, developing and piloting innovative new projects, that build on their expertise and can have the greatest impact in local communities
- develop new partnerships with a wider range of funders so we can turn our plans into action on the ground and widen our impact.

Our four supporting pillars

To deliver our overarching ambition we need to ensure that we are resilient, capable and adaptable. So we have identified four pillars to shape the way we work internally to ensure we have a solid foundation for our strategy. They will ensure that we have the right resources, a resilient network and compelling communications. **We will:**





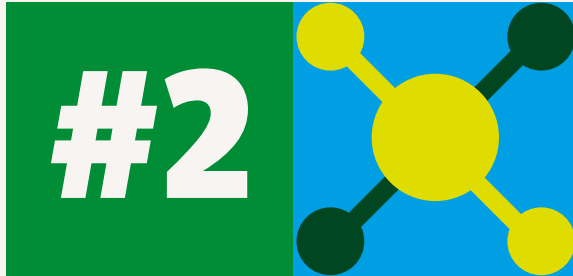
Creating a robust financial model: strengthening our financial and organisational resilience

Our strategy is intentionally ambitious. It reflects the unpredictable and rapidly changing environment we are working in, the continued challenges that face rural communities, and the great potential for positive change. If we are going to deliver, an essential first step is to ensure that we have a robust financial model which enables us to plan ahead and invest in change. We are very grateful to Defra and other funders for their support, some of which stretches back over many years, which has been vitally important for us and our network. We will continue to value those relationships highly and will look for new opportunities to work together.

But this will not be enough on its own. We will also prioritise investing in new approaches to income generation so we can increase our activity and impact. We will explore new business models and alternative sources of funding so we can diversify and grow our income. In addition we will learn from the innovation taking place in our network and the not for profit sector more widely. We will explore new funding relationships with a more diverse range of partners, who share our vision for rural communities, and who can help us to deliver our ambitions while maintaining our integrity and focus. As we increase our financial resilience we will work with our network members to help them increase their own.

We will also ensure that we support and develop another critical resource: our team. The ACRE team is highly committed, motivated and knowledgeable and enables the organisation to have an impact that far exceeds its small size. In our team every role is essential and every team member is valued for their contribution. We will explore more ways to help team members enhance their existing professional skills and gain new ones. We will create more opportunities for our team to work alongside our members and the communities they support so they can share best practice and find new ways to work together. And just as importantly, we will also ensure that we create chances for the team to come together to celebrate their achievements.

“We will explore new business models and alternative sources of funding so we can diversify and grow our income.”



Working with our members: supporting the ACRE Network

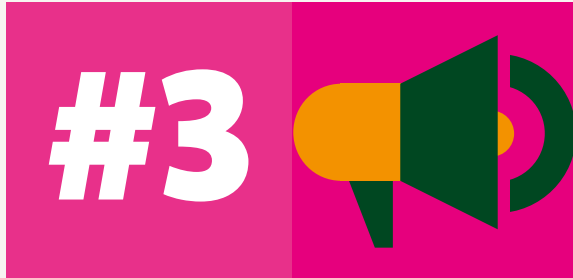
The ACRE Network's 38 county-based members are at the heart of our work and are integral to our strategy. We will continue to work with our members to help them to build their resilience, expand their capacity and increase their impact. More specifically we will continue to consult them to ensure we are meeting their needs, and introduce changes to ensure we are providing effective, innovative support. We will review the way we communicate to ensure we are as effective as possible and will use new technology where we can to help us do this.

We will do more to connect our members, to make it easier for them to collaborate and support each other by sharing their capacity and best practice. In addition we will invest in helping them to co-design and pilot new initiatives together. We will help our members to monitor, respond and adapt to external changes, such as the impact of devolution and other reforms to local government, to ensure they can continue to champion and

“We will continue to work with our members to help them to build their resilience, expand their capacity and increase their impact.”

enable rural communities effectively. We will work with them to develop a stronger identity for the ACRE Network, so that jointly we can showcase our unique reach and expertise and the enormous impact we have collectively.





Investing in raising the profile of rural communities: increasing understanding and speaking up

We know that one of the key barriers to better outcomes for rural communities is the lack of awareness and understanding of the issues they face among policy makers and other decision makers. We are determined to change this and will launch new initiatives during our strategy period to drive this forward:



Understanding lived experience – gathering insights

We will gather insights into the lived experiences of individuals in rural communities who face the greatest challenges as a result of where they live. We will use these insights to help ensure we remain focused on the right things and to shape our policy development and campaigning activity. We will draw on the experience of our members, who are deeply embedded in their local communities, and other organisations with relevant expertise to develop our work in this area. Based on the insights we have gained from our network we will focus on three groups during this strategy period: young people between 16 and 25, people who are particularly isolated as a result of illness, disability or caring responsibilities, and people facing the greatest financial hardship.

Building our voice – a network of rural campaigners

We would like to develop a national network of volunteers, who would like to use their time and expertise to help us increase our capacity and expand our impact no matter how remote their location. We want our volunteer base to reflect the diversity of people who call rural areas their home, including those under 30, and will pilot different types of volunteering to support this. We will start by developing a team of rural campaigners, who will help us to raise the profile of rural issues, develop and deliver our campaigns, and secure new sources of support. Together we will champion rural communities and work for change.

Learning from the past – sharing our history

Our unique history is also a key part of the story we wish to tell. We are very grateful to the dedicated volunteers who have given their advice and time to help us conserve our archives. Working in partnership we will develop a strategy and plan of action to safeguard ACRE's archives for the future and make this unique social history more widely accessible. We will also work with our volunteers to secure the resources we need so we can further good governance and effectively record, archive and celebrate the activities of ACRE, the ACRE Network and the rural communities with which they work into the future.





Building new relationships and alliances: widening our reach

Working in collaboration with other organisations lies at the heart of our work and will be even more important during this strategy period. We greatly value our long-standing relationship with Defra. We will also continue to play an active role in many different alliances and partnerships, including the Rural Coalition, the Rural Flood Resilience Partnership, the National Energy Systems Operator (NESO) Farming and Land Use Societal Forum, and the European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA).

In addition we will build new alliances, with organisations which may not be focused exclusively on rural affairs, but which have expert knowledge of the key issues affecting rural communities, such as health and social care, housing, digital networks and the transition to net zero. By working across sectors we will be able to reach wider audiences and develop new kinds of partnerships that enable rural communities to take action, improve their quality of life, and unlock new opportunities and resources.

“By working across sectors we will be able to reach wider audiences and develop new kinds of partnerships that enable rural communities to take action.”



How we make change happen

ACRE's Theory of Change shows the difference we want to see in the world, and how we will contribute to delivering that change in more detail.

Need

Rural communities are often poorly understood and ignored in policy development. As a result they have inequitable access to essential infrastructure, services and jobs, making it harder for people to secure the resources and support they need and to realise the potential of the rural economy.

Vision

Rural communities that are thriving, inclusive, and sustainable, and have the support they need to ensure equitable outcomes for everyone.

Purpose

ACRE exists to achieve positive change for people living in rural communities, particularly those facing the greatest needs and challenges because of where they live.

Our beneficiaries

People who live in rural communities across England, particularly those who are facing the greatest needs and challenges as a result of where they live.

Inputs

- Our knowledge and expertise
- The ACRE Network
- Lived experience of rural communities
- Our partners and funders
- Our employees and volunteers
- Our income and resources

Activities

- Research and analysis
- Policy development and advocacy
- Building coalitions and public campaigning
- Managing national programmes and services
- Distributing national grants and funding

- Capacity building and training
- Co-designing and delivering programmes and services
- Promoting ACRE's collective impact
- Sharing best practice and innovation

Interim outcomes

- Better awareness and understanding of rural issues
- More opportunities for rural communities to shape policy and practice on the ground
- More equitable access to resources for urgent needs

- Increased profile and support
- Greater organisational capacity and expertise
- More diverse partners and funders

Longer-term outcomes

- Positive changes to public policy that impacts rural communities
- Increased co-production and community action
- More equitable access to services and infrastructure
- Increased investment in rural communities
- Increased social capital to enable rural communities to take action

- Expanded services to enable local communities and address their needs
- Greater financial resilience to manage change and seize opportunities

Impact

Rural communities are thriving, inclusive and adaptable to change, improving wellbeing and quality of life.

Campaigning, enabling and improving support

Supporting and developing our network

Let's get started

Our new strategy marks a critical moment for our organisation. It sets out the direction of travel for the next five years, and establishes some important changes in the way that we will work. We will develop a bolder voice and speak up more loudly for rural communities. We will make choices about where we focus our efforts, prioritising the issues where we can achieve the greatest outcomes and build most momentum. We will pilot new ways of working with our network, making better use of our collective power to maximise our impact, and testing new ways to support those in greatest need. We are committed to achieving rural communities that are thriving, inclusive and adaptable to change, improving individual wellbeing and quality of life.

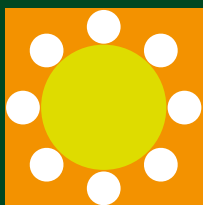
“We will pilot new ways of working with our network, making better use of our collective power to maximise our impact.”

We want to deliver lasting change but we can't do it alone. We will achieve success by working in partnership. If you share our ambition and would like to know more please get in touch to explore how we can work together.



How we developed our strategy

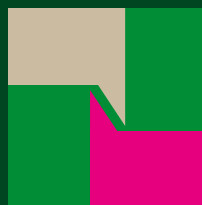
We developed our strategy using a step-by-step approach based on evidence and a robust theory of change. We have also sought the perspectives and expertise of many different individuals and organisations as we have developed our thinking. More specifically:



We convened a **strategy working group** to steer the process.



We **conducted extensive desk research** into the issues facing rural communities to ensure that our thinking was evidence based and up to date.



We asked our network about the issues they are dealing with and the **concerns of rural communities**.



We sought the **views of external stakeholders and funders** about our work and future development.



We **built a theory of change** to underpin our strategy and ensure that we focus on the areas where we can have the greatest impact.



We **held workshops** with our employees and network members to get feedback as we developed more detailed ideas.

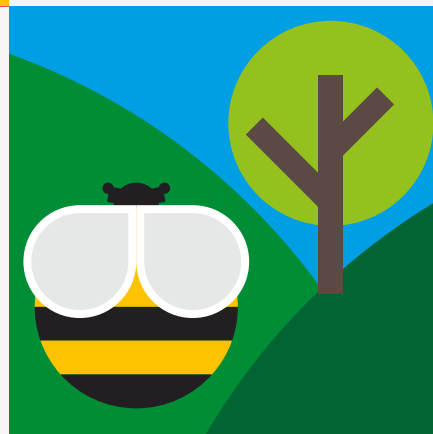
We are very grateful to everyone who gave up their time to contribute to the process.

ACRE is the national voice for the ACRE Network which consists of 38 independent charities.

Our members are experts in enabling and supporting their local rural communities and working with them to reach their full potential. Together we are a national movement of organisations that share a common vision and set of objectives for rural communities.

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Connecting Communities in Berkshire
Community Impact Bucks
Cambridgeshire ACRE
Cheshire Community Action
Cornwall Rural Community Charity
ACTion with Communities in Cumbria
Rural Action Derbyshire
Devon Communities Together
Dorset Community Action
Durham Community Action
Rural Community Council of Essex
Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC)
Action Hampshire
Community First in Herefordshire & Worcestershire
Community Development Action Hertfordshire
Humber & Wolds Rural Action
Community Action Isle of Wight
Kent ACRE

Community Futures, Lancashire
Rural Community Council (Leicestershire & Rutland)
YMCA Lincolnshire
Community Action Norfolk
Northamptonshire ACRE
Community Action Northumberland
Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire
Community First Oxfordshire
Community Resource (Shropshire)
Thrive (Somerset)
Support Staffordshire
Community Action Suffolk
Surrey Community Action
Action in rural Sussex
Tees Valley Rural Action
Warwickshire Rural Community Council
West of England Rural Network
Community First, Wiltshire and Swindon
Community First Yorkshire



Action with Communities in Rural England

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