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**Archives Revealed Scoping Report for  
the archives of ACRE and the Rural  
Community Councils**

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## Acronyms

ACRE – Action with Communities in Rural England  
FANs – Friends of the ACRE Network  
MERL – Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading  
NLHF - National Lottery Heritage Fund  
NCSS – National Council of Social Service (now the National Council of Voluntary Organisations)  
NVHF – National Village Halls Forum  
RCC – Rural Community Council  
SCRCC – Standing Conference of Rural Community Councils  
TNA – The National Archives



## Executive summary

### Overview

ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) and its predecessor, the Standing Conference of Rural Community Councils (SCRCC), has been an important element in the modern history of rural England. Whilst ACRE has not actively maintained a formal archive those papers that have survived both at ACRE and with individual employees provides the only dedicated historical record of ACRE. As such it is important that these records are secured and appropriately managed to ensure their survival and accessibility.

Some of the ACRE Network Members (generically referred to as Rural Community Councils or RCCs) have placed a selection of their records with local authority archive services but not all and this is rarely done in an informed or comprehensive manner.

The records are of value to ACRE and ACRE network members to evidence their authority to advocate for and work with rural communities and inform their current advocacy and decision-making. They are also of value to researchers and policy makers as fundamental records of the modern rural experience

Currently these records are very vulnerable: they are distributed across various locations; they are stored in unsuitable environments with real risks of physical degradation ; they are not accessible; they are not actively managed so are at a very high risk of disposal. Furthermore, digital records have no archival management and so the current activities of ACRE and the RCCs will not be saved for posterity if they are not actively managed in line with professional digital preservation practice.

### Recommendations

#### *Develop a clear strategy*

- Develop and approve a Mission Statement for the ACRE archive
- Develop and adopt a formal strategy for the ACRE archive and an approach to encourage RCCs to secure their own archives

#### *For ACRE material at Latton*

- Archival material is identified and moved short-term into commercial heritage storage that meets professional archival standards
- A permanent home is found for the ACRE archive in a formal archive repository
- A cataloguing project is undertaken with professional archival guidance
- An archive collecting policy is drawn up with professional archival guidance, staff are trained in the policy and one staff member has specific responsibility to identify analogue and digital archival material and work with the repository to move archival material to the repository as appropriate, on an on-going basis



- ACRE works with the repository to make its archive accessible and ensure it is used

#### *For RCCs*

- Develop simple guidance on key records to be retained, with guidance from a professional archivist
- Develop a programme using volunteers to assist RCCs in reviewing records, identifying analogue and digital archival material and transferring it to the RCC's local record office on a regular basis e.g. once every five years

#### *For material with individuals*

- ACRE undertakes an appeal to individuals to identify where ACRE material is held in private hands
- ACRE negotiates with the archive repository to include appropriate material from individuals in the ACRE archive

#### **Potential cataloguing project**

ACRE should seek resources for a project to catalogue ACRE archival material held in Latton and by private individuals. A volunteer cataloguing project overseen by a professional archivist has an estimated cost (at September 2024) of £10,720, including repackaging material in archival quality packaging.

#### **Interest expressed by the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) in the ACRE collection**

MERL has expressed a strong interest in exploring whether to collect the ACRE archive. It is now up to ACRE to contact MERL to develop this conversation.



# 1. Introduction, methodology, and background

## 1.1. Introduction

This report provides an assessment of the significance and needs of the archive of ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) and makes recommendations for its future management and accessibility. This report has been developed by Elizabeth Oxborrow-Cowan, Consultant Archivist, in close consultation with representatives of ACRE and the Friends of Acre Network (FANs). The report has been funded by The National Archives (TNA) under its 'Archives Revealed' grant programme.

Elizabeth Oxborrow-Cowan is a professionally qualified archivist and Fellow of the Archives and Records Association (ARA). She has run her own consultancy since 2003. During that time she has worked with all types of organisations that hold archives and run archive services from small, voluntary bodies to national institutions. She also works with professional bodies and policy makers (such as The National Archives, the Welsh Government and the Archives and Records Association) undertaking research, evaluation and providing advice to inform policy and decision-making in the UK archive sector. She is a Peer Reviewer for the Archive Service Accreditation Standard, a Trustee of the professional network Archives West Midlands, a Director of the National Conservation Service and a Mentor and Assessor for the ARA Professional Membership scheme.

Elizabeth has developed numerous Scoping Reports for a wide variety of organisations and has supported organisations to apply for cataloguing funding, both falling under the 'Archives Revealed'<sup>1</sup> programme delivered by The National Archives.

*Note: throughout this report there is use of the term RCCs (standing for Rural Community Councils) as a generic term for the member organisations that make up the ACRE network.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-revealed/>



## 1.2 Methodology

The report was developed with the following stages of work

- Background reading of internal documents including listings of material such as NCVO holdings at London Archives and material held by private individuals, plus reading Nigel Curry's 'Reaping a community harvest'<sup>2</sup> which assesses the work and impact of the ACRE network over the last century
- Site visits to view the ACRE collection held at a commercial store in Latton near Swindon, the collection of a former staff member in Powys and the Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (RCC)
- Stakeholder interviews with a range of current and former staff at ACRE and a selection of RCCs
- Review of relevant material held by The National Archives

## 1.3 Background to ACRE

ACRE is a charity which represents ACRE Network members (charities formerly generically called Rural Community Councils, or RCCs) across England and works to support rural communities. It's work includes:

- Supporting the work of the Network members by:
  - Promoting the work of the members
  - Providing technical guidance and training including to help Network members support village halls
  - Advocating to influence government policy and reflect the views of the Network's members to decision-makers
  - Provide networking opportunities for its members
  - Broker and administer national grant schemes
  - Run national projects that support the work of the Network members
- Distributing Government funding for investment in the ACRE network with national projects across a wide range of areas such as trialling new approaches, modernising rural facilities
- Supporting village halls by coordinating an advice service for village halls with county-based Village Hall Advisers, distributing Government funding for upgrading the fabric of village halls and running the annual campaign Village Halls Week

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<sup>2</sup> Curry Nigel, *Reaping a Community Harvest - Celebrating 100 Years of England's Rural Community Councils*, The Countryside and Community Press, 2021, ISBN 978-1-5272-9841-5  
<https://store.glos.ac.uk/product-catalogue/books-publications/countryside-and-community-research-institute/reaping-a-community-harvest-nigel-curry>



- Advocating on behalf of rural communities to local and national decision-makers, funders and others who influence the rural experience
- Commissioning and delivering research to provide the evidence for advocacy and inform the work of ACRE and the Network members
- A very active publications programme that includes research findings, technical advice and guidance to Network members and rural communities e.g. on running village halls.

The establishment of ACRE in 1987 was a natural development in the long term evolution of organisations representing rural interests.

In the wake of the First World War organisations emerged to tackle serious issues in rural communities including poverty, housing and health. One of these was the Rural Department set up in 1919 within the National Council of Social Service (NCSS).

The period after the First World War also saw the emergence of the RCCs. These were each independently established in individual English counties during the twentieth century, the earliest being in Oxfordshire. Over the last century the RCCs have sought to support all aspects of rural life such as effective transport, affordable and sufficient housing, village hall building and operation, health, technological advances, cultural and educational opportunities. The Rural Department worked with the RCCs amongst a range of rural organisations.

In 1970 the Standing Conference of Rural Community Councils was established as part of the National Council of Social Service to enable the RCCs to work with each other and with the NCSS centrally. The SCRCC morphed into the independent charity, ACRE, in 1987.

In 2020, as part of the centenary celebrations of the RCCs, an 'Alumni' group was set up for anyone who had had any involvement with the RCCs, ACRE and related networks and wished to share the story of their experiences. This group became the Friends of the ACRE Network (FANs) in 2023. FANs has dedicated itself to capturing and preserving the history of ACRE and the RCCs. It has undertaken a variety of work to push this forward including applying for the Archives Revealed funding for this Scoping Report and providing the Steering Group (which includes two ACRE Board members) that has overseen the Report's development.



## 2. Description and significance of the collection

### 2.1 Latton

#### *Description*

There are about 17 bankers' boxes<sup>3</sup> of material that contain archival material.

Broadly the content includes:

- ACRE Annual reports and annual reviews 1988 to 2008
- Numerous publications by ACRE throughout its existence notably guidance for village halls (e.g. alcohol, maintenance, heating, accounting, designing and building), surveys (e.g. of village halls in 1988)
- Reports of ACRE's 'Rural Life' conferences 1995, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001
- Conference papers for the RCC Network Policy Conference November 2002 in Stoke Rochford and ACRE's 20th Birthday Conference June 2006 at Nottingham University
- Material relating to the NVHF including:
  - NVHF Committee Meeting Minutes 2001 - 2016
  - NVHF AGMs with Income and Expenditure and Chairman's report 2010-2016
  - NVHF Constitution
  - NVHF Newsletter 'The Voice of Village Halls' 2004 - 2009
  - Group of papers about NVHF entitled 'campaigning' - appears to be correspondence and notes around campaigns by NVHF including correspondence and meeting minutes with county councils and Govt ministers c. 2004 - 2010
- Publications by other bodies previously held in the ACRE library
- ACRE Board papers for 2003 to 2008 and 2012 to 2014
- Governance documents and decisions within ACRE throughout its existence.
- SCRCC minutes 1970 to 1987 and SCRCC AGM papers 1970 to 1978
- Individual applications to ACRE for the rural Community Loans Fund. Paperwork includes application including evaluation of need and photos, ACRE loan repayments
- Very occasional correspondence e.g. with the Government about sale/ reuse of church property
- The non-archival material is primarily accounting records which should probably be destroyed.

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<sup>3</sup> The term "banker's box" is used by archivists to distinguish the box from professional archival boxes which meet conservation standards and to indicate a box size of dimensions about 16x13x10 inches and 1.2 cubic feet in volume, usually with a lid. They are often used by commercial storage companies.



As well as paper records there is digital content:

- *Various floppy and other data discs including*
  - 1988 Village Halls Survey
  - 1998 Village Halls Survey
  - 2001 21st Century Village Halls Survey
  
- *Various DVDs, undated:*
  - Village Agents – Providing Older People in Gloucestershire’s rural communities with easier access to information and services. DVD produced by Gloucestershire County Council and Gloucestershire Primary Care Trust in partnership with Gloucestershire RCC
  - Over the Hill? Wise Up to Rural Ageing. The Rural Media Company with ACRE et al
  - Wheels to Work. Transforming People’s Lives. Wiltshire Community First et al
  - Greener Villages. Cases Studies on how local groups have made a real difference to environment etc. Humber and Wolds RCC et al
  - A Loss for Everyone. A Report by Voluntary Action Cumbria
  
- *Various other CDs/DVDs without cases related to:*
  - Community Led /Parish Planning
  - Helping the Village Shop Thrive
  - Village Agents Good Practice Guide
  - Fuel Poverty
  - Affordable Housing
  - Village SOS Projects
  - Assessing and Managing Local Distinctiveness
  - Dentdale Village Plan Interview, Cumbria
  - Commission for Rural Communities – Tackling Rural Disadvantage. Hidden Voices

The material held at Latton appears to only relate to ACRE and not earlier periods. The contents of the ACRE library appear to have been lost with only occasional publications surviving.

### *Significance*

This is the primary historical record of ACRE. Whilst it is incomplete it does provide a clear picture of the work of ACRE, with the run of Annual Reports being the most important source in this respect. The minutes of the NVHF are also important for capturing a long-standing responsibility of ACRE and its predecessors in terms of supporting individual communities. The minutes for the SCRCC are important in tracking the activity of ACRE’s predecessor.



Together these records bring out in detail the serious issues that have persisted in the countryside, taking on different manifestations but with long-term themes that matter to society as a whole such as transport, employment, housing and rural development. They show the debates that have taken place and the parties to those debates and how the role of ACRE and the RCCs has shifted over the years. They reflect changes in Government priorities, policy and funding relating to rural matters and ACRE's advocacy activity. The records also demonstrate the practical responses to these issues, which can be of value in current debates.

The material at Latton matters because through its documentation of the SCRCC and ACRE it portrays the realities of rural life with a national perspective but always with a view to the impact of its work on local communities. It provides an alternative record of the rural experience to counterbalance that captured in the archives of local and central government. As such it complements the collections of local authority archives and the UK Government archive at The National Archive but also those of other local organisations and individuals such as parish councils and local societies such as the WI. This material also connects with the large NCVO collection held by London Archives (see overview below) and clearly connects directly into the RCC material held in local record offices.

## **2.2 Material held by individuals**

A small number of individuals have sought to secure material by retaining it within their possession. These provide a varied series of documentation that appears to relate primarily to the activities of ACRE (i.e. from the 1990s onwards). This is shaped by their individual roles at ACRE but includes meeting minutes of individual committees, reports and evaluations, survey working papers and final reports, ACRE guidance and publications, newsletters, correspondence, papers about individual situations e.g. individual VAT cases with HMRC. The subjects covered are as varied as the work of ACRE e.g. supporting village halls, advocacy and advice to central Government, distributing funding. Depending on the work of the individual they may also include records relating to individual RCCs.

A significant proportion of this content was produced outside of ACRE and its predecessors e.g. government white papers, reports by bodies such as the Rowntree Trust and the Princes Trust. Whilst this material may exist in other archives its value here is that it has been collected by individuals knowledgeable about rural communities and is drawn together making it readily accessible for contextualising ACRE's history as it was received in the course of that history. Furthermore, these records may not have been retained by the originating body. However, the issue for a long-term home would be whether the recipient was willing to accept material that was not directly produced by the NCVO/SCRCC / ACRE.



### *Significance*

The papers held by individuals matter because they may be the only record of certain ACRE activity. The failure by ACRE to actively collect its archive and the penchant of some former employees to make space by disposing of old records means that what has survived is only a fraction of ACRE’s experience. The records that have been consciously saved by individual employees reflects what they consider to be important and may well fill important gaps in the ACRE collection (e.g. newsletters, evaluations, publications). They can also provide specific examples of ACRE’s work in a particular aspect e.g. individual case studies of individual recipients for a certain funding stream. Undoubtedly such material does need appraisal to remove low value, duplicate or irrelevant material but these do deserve serious consideration to augment the material held by ACRE and create a more coherent record.

## **2.3 Material relating to individual RCCs**

### *Description*

The RCCs do not have any formal or routine archival practice. It is clear that a few individual RCCs have placed material over the years with their local authority record offices. However, this has been driven by individuals within RCCs recognising the historical value of their work and making their own judgements as to what material to place with the record office.

David Clark’s research (2021) on resources for studying the RCCs and ACRE identified the following pattern of deposits at local record offices:

<b>Description of the amount of material held in a local record office for an individual organisation (RCC)</b>	<b>Number of relevant organisations whose records are held in record offices</b>
Substantial deposits with a largely complete set of annual reports etc	13
Partial deposits covering only a limited period	8
No deposits by RCC but oddments placed by a 3rd party i.e. village halls, or parish clerks	15
Collection held but no online catalogue	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>



Good examples of such deposits include for the RCCs for Sussex, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Nottinghamshire and Monmouthshire. A search on The National Archives' 'Discovery Portal'<sup>4</sup> helps to indicate where RCC records may be (including at The National Archives) but this may not be a comprehensive or entirely up to date as placing content on Discovery is entirely voluntary, depends on the individual archive service to update and requires material to have had at least a basic description created by the archive service.

David's figures suggest 10 RCCs have not deposited any material with their local record office.

RCC material varies but the collections such as those of Essex and Sussex have records from the establishment of the RCC and include key record 'series' such as minutes of various committees within an RCC, Board minutes and papers, annual reports, AGM papers, publications including evaluations and surveys and guidance, newspaper cuttings.

But there is no coherent collecting activity within most RCCs. It is not a strategic priority for the RCCs. They are very stretched in their capacity and do not have the means to undertake heritage collecting. This is exacerbated in some RCCs by a high staff turnover so staff do not have a long-term vested interest in the RCC.

However, interviewees did consider the history of their RCC was an important element in advocacy, relationship building and commission by demonstrating their long-term expertise and ability to deliver rural projects.

### *Significance*

The RCC collections matter because they narrate the local response to identifying and tackling rural issues and opportunities. Again, they reflect the changes in Government Policy and bring out the recent experience of individual regions. They complement and dovetail into the ACRE records.

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<sup>4</sup> For search results for 'rural community council' go to [https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?\\_ep=rural%20community%20council&\\_dss=range&\\_ro=any&\\_st=adv](https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?_ep=rural%20community%20council&_dss=range&_ro=any&_st=adv)



## 2.4 A note on holdings at London Archives

London Archives (formerly London Metropolitan Archives) holds archives relating to the NCVO<sup>5</sup>. It is a reasonably large archive covering 29 linear metres of shelving. The catalogue entry describes the contents as:

- Internal Services records - main series of minutes of NCSS/NCVO committees, Interdepartmental groups, Members' groups and Associated Bodies, regional and central organisation and the histories of various NCSS/NCVO departments. Also short series of financial material, legal material and documentation from the Advice Unit and Rural Department of the NCVO.
- Membership Division - policy and the Research Department
- Public Affairs Division - National/International and Overseas Departments, the Press and Parliamentary sections including the Information Department and one of the largest series, that of publications.

It appears to be an extensive archive covering the activities of the NCVO throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst not entirely comprehensive it does appear to have coherent runs of some key documents such as AGMs from 1925 to 1990 and Executive Committee papers from 1925 to 1993.

This material is now professionally managed because it is held by professional archive services.

## 2.5 Material at The National Archives about ACRE

TNA also holds records either created by or including ACRE in some way.

Searching on 'Discovery' portal at TNA provides some returns

[https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?\\_dss=range&\\_ro=any&\\_q=action+for+communities+in+rural+england](https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?_dss=range&_ro=any&_q=action+for+communities+in+rural+england) – including publications and policy advice.

## 2.6 Conclusion

ACRE is an important element in the modern history of rural communities ranging from the experience of individual villages through to national government policy. However, there has not been any concerted or organised approach to capturing the

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<sup>5</sup> For the catalogue entry go to <https://search.lma.gov.uk/SCRIPTS/MWIMAIN.DLL/51Re3fE1TW3GIJ2N5/2/1/1468?RECORD&UNION=Y&URLMARKER=STARTREQUEST>



documentation of its work. This Scoping Report has found that there are distributed pockets of records that need to be clearly identified, collated and professionally managed to ensure the work of ACRE is captured in the historical record. ACRE needs to act to preserve its story.

### 3. Profile of the collection's management

Note: This assessment has been undertaken against a range of professional standards. The overarching standard is *Archive Service Accreditation*<sup>6</sup>, which in turn refers to other standards. For this section the most relevant of these standards are *BS 4971:2017 Conservation and care of archive and library collections*<sup>7</sup> and *BS EN 16893:2018 Conservation Of Cultural Heritage. Specifications For Location, Construction And Modification Of Buildings Or Rooms Intended For The Storage Or Use Of Heritage Collections*<sup>8</sup>.

#### 3.1 The collection held by ACRE at Latton

##### 3.1.1 Description

The ACRE collection comprises approximately 60 bankers boxes of material. The formats comprise:

- The vast majority of the collection is printed paper documents
- Publications – the next largest format category
- A small number of photographic prints – mostly of village halls - their structure and activities
- A small number of digital formats notably DVDs
- Architectural plans and maps - notably amongst the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Village Halls applications

##### 3.1.2 Provenance and ownership

The collection was created by ACRE in the course of its activities since ACRE's establishment

##### 3.1.3 Storage

The collection held by ACRE is held in a commercial storage facility at a rural location near to Cirencester. The storage is as to be expected with the following features:

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/archive-service-accreditation/supporting-guidance/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://knowledge.bsigroup.com/products/conservation-and-care-of-archive-and-library-collections?version=standard>

<sup>8</sup> <https://knowledge.bsigroup.com/products/conservation-of-cultural-heritage-specifications-for-location-construction-and-modification-of-buildings-or-rooms-intended-for-the-storage-or-use-of-heritage-collections?version=standard>





- The building is constructed of breeze block with an external wood cladding and tiled roof
- The individual storage pods are separated by chipboard walls and each has a chipboard floor, a metal door and plastic fascia on the external wall of the pod facing the communal corridor
- The roof is insulated and has a chipboard ceiling
- Neighbouring the building containing ACRE's storage unit there are a couple of other storage units and freight containers providing storage space as well as a domestic dwelling adjacent to this location. Otherwise the location is surrounded by farmland

The risks of the storage to the material can be rated as follows:

Risk to material	Description	Risk Rating
Temperature and relative humidity control	There is no environmental control so records are susceptible to the ambient temperature and relative humidity. They are thus subject to wide ranging fluctuations that at times will breach professionally recommended standards thus stressing the structure of materials through a cycle of rapid contractions and expansions, speeding up rates of chemical decay and possibly enabling mould growth through high humidity.	High
Fire	There appears to be no fire detection or suppression other than hand held extinguishers. The use of chipboard for partitions, flooring and ceiling is a fire risk. There is fluorescent lighting in the corridors (but none in the individual storage pods) and wall-mounted electrical fly killers plus a single power point. It is not known what content is stored or activity is undertaken in the other pods (e.g. users smoking) so the fire risk is not easy to assess.	High



Risk to material	Description	Risk Rating
Pests	There are electrical fly killers mounted on the walls and rat traps along the outside wall of the building. However, dead spiders were found amongst ACRE records and there were slug trails in the corridor. The lack of environmental control, the amount of dirt on the floor, the lack of cleaning or monitoring, and the risk of infection brought in by users of other pods means that pests are a risk. Furthermore, the external wood cladding and the ceiling space provide suitable living spaces for insects and rodents.	High
Security	The location has CCTV, a key fob operated main entrance and a customer-supplied padlock on each unit. There is nothing that indicates who occupies each unit. Given these measures and its rural location the security risk is reasonably low.	Low
Dirt	The unit is not clean. There is a large amount of debris on the floor of the communal corridor either brought in by users or blown in under the loosely fitting doors. Some of the boxes in the ACRE pod had noticeable grit on their lids. There does not appear to be any significant cleaning regime at the storage unit.	High

### 3.1.4 Condition, packaging and conservation

The records at Latton are generally in a satisfactory condition but face physical risks outlined in this section.

Nearly all of the ACRE collection is in ordinary cardboard boxes, which provide some protection to records from the pervasive dirt and light. However, the boxes are not archival. They are either bankers' boxes or boxes used for general packaging. All are acidic (which will cause damage to the documents in the long run by increasing their acidity) and most of them are not sturdy enough to take the weight of their contents. During the survey the bottoms of numerous boxes gave way when being carried. Because of the depth of the boxes they hold a large amount of material which makes them a health and safety hazard to move and may damage certain formats from the weight of other material on top of them in the box.



A material proportion of the collections are held in plastic wallets. These will leak plasticiser and could stick to documents.

There are also paperclips and non-brass staples which could risk and stain documents in the long-term, particularly if humidity is high.

Of particular concern were the minutes of the SCRCC from 1970 to 1987. It comprises typed sheets each stuck with cheap glue onto cheap paper. This poses a number of risks including the glue has stained the individual sheets, sheets are becoming unstuck with the risk of damage or loss, and the support paper is very cheap and acidic so increasing the acidity of the typed sheet. Given this is one of the most valuable record series in the collection these risks are of particular concern and should be addressed promptly by employing a professional conservator<sup>9</sup> to advise and take action.

There are some digital formats – DVDs and CDs. Neither is a stable, long-term medium and the availability of technology to read these formats is diminishing as the technologies fall out of use. So the content is at real risk of loss due to failure or technological obsolescence of the carrier format. It needs to be transferred to a suitable digital format by a specialist e.g. regional film archives provide a commercial transfer service.

### 3.1.5 *Management*

Management of the ACRE material is minimal. The store is used for holding any material that is needed to be kept. In amongst archival material is non-archival material, notably financial records (invoices, accounting system print outs, bank statements). Neither the content nor the storage space is actively managed.

### 3.1.6 *Accessibility*

The material is effectively inaccessible. The storage location is in an out of the way location and has no public transport. One staff member has the access key. There is no space to consult material inside or outside the storage pod. Indeed, it is a potentially dangerous working environment with no lighting in storage pods, cramped spaces, no bathroom facilities, and high shelving necessitating the use of steps.

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<sup>9</sup> The Institute of Conservation (ICON) provides a register of Accredited Conservators which ACRE/FANs can use to find a suitable paper conservator <https://www.conservationregister.com>



Furthermore, there is no readily available catalogue or finding aid to identify what is held in storage (although there is a simple spreadsheet listing of content held by certain individuals in FANs and ACRE).

### 3.1.7 *Provenance and ownership*

All the material at Latton was generated by ACRE and is owned by ACRE.

### 3.1.8 *Access to archival skills*

ACRE does not have any access to professional archival advice.

## 3.2 **Material held by RCCs**

This material is not actively managed and is vulnerable to uninformed disposal. There is no active preservation activity (e.g. packaging, environmental control) and records are not available for wider consultation beyond RCC staff. Whilst individual staff at certain RCCs have identified material and moved it to their local record office this has been ad hoc and not informed by a coherent collecting policy or good archival practice. The RCCs do not have direct access to professional archival advice (other than going to their local authority record office of which they may not be aware).

## 3.3 **Material held by individuals**

This material is valued by its holders as they have recognised its historical value. However, it is not actively managed and may be held in unsuitable conditions (e.g. very warm domestic rooms) or unsuitable packaging (e.g. acidic wallet files and plastic wallets).

Furthermore, there has not been any attempt to develop a coherent assessment of who has retained material in their possession or description of what that material is. However, members of FANs have developed simple listings of material held by a few individuals which provides a very useful basis for understanding the likely material held by private individuals.

These individuals do not have any access to archival advice.

The material is also at risk as the holders tend to be older individuals who do not have any obvious option on where to deposit the material. In some cases they are keen to hand it on as they get older and do not want this responsibility.



## 4. Use/research potential

### 4.1 Introduction

The ACRE and RCC material is specialist material which is going to be primarily of interest to ACRE, the RCCs and researchers, particularly those interested in social and rural history. The collections would also be useful when used in conjunction with other collections e.g. government rural policy held in The National Archives, local history in the local authority record offices (e.g. individual villages, the work of county associations of local councils which were involved in the work of many RCCs), archives of social and community action such as the NFWI. However, there is potential for some public engagement particularly around local history and the modern history of individual villages and localities.

### 4.2 Supporting the reputation and work of ACRE and the RCCs

The historical records are vital for current staff to understand and draw on ACRE and the RCCs experience:

- Providing the corporate memory for ACRE to draw on e.g. understanding its historical position on particular areas of government policy and the reasons for that position, using previous decisions and experience to inform current decision making – using committee papers and correspondence with government
- Knowing who were key figures in ACRE's past – through newsletters and meetings papers
- Evidencing ACRE and the RCCs's specialist knowledge, practical experience and very long-standing relationships with local communities to justify their role to advocate for rural communities, provide services and distribute funding – using publications and advocacy material
- Provide long-term data and previous experience to inform solutions for current rural issues e.g. demonstrating the centrality of village halls to village life and thus the importance of continuing investment in this area, demonstrating the impact of appropriate investment e.g. using survey results
- Provide context that can be presented to policy makers, campaigners and funders for understanding how and why rural communities are in their current situations – e.g. using ACRE and RCC reports on specific subjects or areas



### **4.3 Reinforcing and celebrating ACRE's identity**

The historical records explain what ACRE has done and its raison d'être:

- Contribute to and explain ACRE and the RCCs's identity both internally to staff and in external promotion to ACRE's stakeholders, particularly important as the RCCs and ACRE experience increasingly fast turnover of staff – e.g. using Annual Reports as a summary of work undertaken
- ACRE input to government policy - e.g. using ACRE responses on White papers and developments such as the appointment of rural housing enablers.
- Engender a sense of pride in staff and communities about the role and impact of the RCCs and ACRE as demonstrated in the 100 Years brochure for Cambridgeshire ACRE
- Identifying and marking key anniversaries in ACRE, the RCCs and local communities – through newsletters and annual reports

### **4.4 Provide research material for professional, private researchers and policy makers as well as ACRE and the RCCs**

The ACRE and RCC material is a key resource for the modern rural story:

- The role of rural communities in seeking to shape their own future
- Evidencing the interaction between communities, ACRE and government and the success and gaps in ACRE's advocacy
- Articulating how rural communities have changed over recent decades but how the underlying themes have persisted (affordable housing, availability of transport, education, village halls, how to approach development in rural areas)
- Understanding the nature of rural action e.g. small yet impactful targeted investment, community groups,
- ACRE and RCCs' political impact at both the local and national level on planning policy, rural development, operational issues such as licensing and VAT
- The importance of the ACRE network in enabling RCCs and inhabitants to learn from each other, form an influential lobbying group, maintain a profile with stakeholders
- Some of the personalities that have driven ACRE and the RCCs forward
- Connectivity to other collections e.g. NCVO, NFWI and individual WIs, local authorities, National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Council for the Protection of Rural England
- Keeps a record throughout of constant change including Government policy and programmes often being short-term with only a few years of funding, churn of staff, churn of locations



#### **4.5 Local communities and private individuals**

There is some local content, particularly in the RCC and village hall material, which will be of value to local communities seeking to understand their past as well as genealogical information of the people who have made up ACRE and the RCCs

- Provide some content for the modern history of individual rural communities though papers relating to individual localities and village halls although this will be far from comprehensive
- Providing details of the involvement of individual people which will be of interest to genealogists

As one interviewee put it these records can tell 'a unique and fabulous story about what has been achieved at different times by different people through voluntary effort. It is about understanding particular individuals whose vision and determination made a big difference for people's lives'



## 5. SWOT (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis

### Strengths

Strength	Impact
Survival of material	There is a record of the work of the RCCs and ACRE
Content of the material that has been survived	Whilst there are significant gaps there is still meaningful content that provides significant detail on the rural experience, particularly since the Second World War

### Weaknesses

Limitation	Impact
Lack of coherent collecting activity in ACRE and the RCCs	Substantially incomplete historical record emerges which results in significant gaps in understanding ACRE and the RCCs' histories and significance
No digital preservation	Archival records that are created digitally are not being identified, secured and properly managed to ensure their survival and accessibility in coming decades
No description of material and no location for collating the description of the different gatherings of material	ACRE, the RCCs and other potential users such as researchers have no way of understanding what material exists and where.
Lack of coherent or straightforward access to material	It is not possible for the RCCs or ACRE to access or leverage their history readily Other researchers cannot look into these histories so ACRE is excluded from the historical record
Advancing age of individuals holding material	Significant risk of material being lost as they become unable to look after the material themselves and their relatives have no interest in it
Advancing age of FANs members	There may be no one to carry on the heritage work in the coming decade so the problems described in this report re-emerge





## Opportunities

Opportunity	Impact
On-going need for advocacy for rural communities	Historical material is valuable for supporting and informing the advocacy process
Potential interest from formal archive repositories	Could provide permanent homes with professional care and providing access to material for a wide range of audiences
Existence of related archives e.g. NFWI, NCVO	Provides a comparator for development but also potential partners for using the material
Existence of potential funders e.g. Archives Revealed, Garfield Weston	Support the cost for cataloguing, packaging and providing access to collections

## Threats

Limitation	Impact
Long-standing situation of on-going funding cuts in the public and charity sector	May further restrict the capacity of ACRE, the RCCs and archive repositories to collect, manage and provide access to archival material.
The shrinking size of RCC staff and the increasing demands on RCCs to tender competitively for work	Even less capacity to attend to their archives or indeed anything outside of immediate business activity resulting in the casual loss of archival material
Continuous reduction in office space for RCCs to save money	Prohibits the storing of archival material given it is not fundamental for daily operations
Excessive demand on funders	Bidding for grant funding is very competitive with limited chance of success but requires significant work to pull a bid together. ACRE may be discouraged from applying and fails to find sufficient resource to care for its archives.
Increasing turnover of ACRE/ RCC staff	Lack of interest by employees in the history of ACRE and the RCCs due to their short tenure so no interest in securing the documentary heritage for the long term, putting historical collections at significant risk of loss



## 6. Assessment and recommendations

The archives of ACRE and the RCCs and material collected by their former employees matters as a core record of the modern rural experience and to help ACRE and the RCCs undertake their business. However, none of these parties has the skills or capacity to care for these records in the long term. It is recommended that the overall strategy should be:

1. Develop a clear strategy for the ACRE and RCC archives
2. To identify archival material at ACRE, the RCCs and with individuals (with professional archival support through a consultant or county record office)
3. Organise the move of such material into a formal repository appropriate for the material e.g. a national organisation for ACRE, local county record offices for individual RCCs
4. Get ACRE material catalogued with funding sourced by ACRE
5. Develop ways of making the ACRE material accessible both through standard archive services (searchroom, online catalogue) but also through specific ACRE projects such as online exhibitions

<b>1. Develop a clear strategy</b>	<b>Deadline</b>
ACRE to develop and approve a Mission Statement for the ACRE archive	Year 1
ACRE to develop and adopt a formal strategy for the future development, management and intended audiences of the ACRE archive and to encourage RCCs to secure their own archives	Year 1
<b>2. Identify and secure material</b>	
<b>ACRE</b>	
Move archival material out of Latton into a commercial heritage store with Deepstore <sup>10</sup> (Cheshire), Restore <sup>11</sup> (North Oxfordshire) or renting space from a local authority record office e.g. Surrey History Centre <sup>12</sup>	Year 1
Sign up the ACRE website to be harvested on the UK Web Archive (run by the UK Legal Deposit Libraries as part of their legal remit to preserve UK websites) at <a href="https://www.webarchive.org.uk">https://www.webarchive.org.uk</a>	Year 1

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.deepstore.com>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.restore.co.uk/records/services/heritage-storage/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre>



<b>2. Identify and secure material contd.</b>	<b>Deadline</b>
<b>ACRE contd.</b>	
Transfer material from DVDs, CDs and floppy disks to modern digital formats. Take advice from one of the regional film archives or a county record office.	Year 2
Develop a clear collecting policy for analogue and digital archives with professional archival input which can be used into the future to identify and secure archival material in future records created by ACRE	Year 2
Train key staff in the collecting policy	Year 2
Use the development of the archive collection policy as a trigger to develop records management processes across ACRE	Year 2
Develop an oral history project of former staff and volunteers, possibly delivered by FANs	Year 3
Collect material in line with the collecting policy	On-going
Clearly identify collecting archival material in line with a collecting policy as part of good governance in ACRE's management procedures and records/ knowledge management	On-going
Include the ACRE archive: as an agenda item in at least one ACRE Board meeting a year; on the agenda of the AGM; on the ACRE Risk Register; in the Annual Report.	On-going
Appoint a conservator to stabilise the SCRCC minutes (see 3.1.4)	Year 2
Transfer content from DVDs and CDs held at Latton <sup>13</sup> (see 3.1.4)	Year 1
<b>RCCs</b>	
Develop guidance on the key record types to collect with professional archival input and possible timescale for reviewing material held and seeking to move it to a local authority record office e.g. every five years	Year 1
ACRE to develop a simple programme of promotion, written support and possibly training to encourage RCCs to identify suitable material. The programme should be the responsibility of an identified ACRE staff member and support from volunteers (FANs?)	Year 2
Trained volunteers (FANs?) to offer support to RCCs to identify and list material	Year 2

<sup>13</sup> A regional film archive such as the Media Archive of Central England (MACE) <https://www.macearchive.org> could do this commercially



<b>Identify and secure material contd.</b>	<b>Deadline</b>
ACRE to encourage the RCCs to sign up for their websites to be harvested on the UK Web Archive at <a href="https://www.webarchive.org.uk">https://www.webarchive.org.uk</a>	Year 2
<b>Individuals</b>	
Accept known material from individuals and add to the ACRE archive where it is in line with the ACRE collecting policy	Year 1
Organise a call out for material amongst ACRE and RCC staff and retirees and FANS and add appropriate material to the ACRE archive.	Year 2
<b>3. Move material to formal archive repositories</b>	
For the ACRE archive identify a formal repository and organise for the move of material into that repository.	Year 1
For RCCs organise volunteer to arrange the move suitable material to the local county record office (including developing arrangements with the individual record office for what to transfer, how and signing of transfer agreements).	Year 2
<b>4. Catalogue content</b>	
Give the responsibility to a staff member within ACRE the remit for identifying historical records both digital and analogue, and ensuring they are preserved long-term (e.g. by sending them to an appropriate archive service).	Year 1
Organise a cataloguing project for ACRE material, possibly using a small team of volunteers guided by a professional archivist	Year 2
Ensure the ACRE catalogue is placed on line either by a formal repository which holds it or by putting the catalogue on The National Archives Discovery Portal	Year 2
<b>5. Make the collection accessible</b>	
Give the responsibility to a staff member within ACRE the remit to guide RCCs on how they can use their historical records in their work and encouraging and guiding them to place their historical records with their local record office.	Year 1
Either ACRE or FANS to join the Community Archives and Heritage Group (CAHG) to showcase the ACRE/ RCC archives, connect with other community archives and access the expertise of the Group <sup>14</sup>	Year 1

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.communityarchives.org.uk>



Identify suitable records for a digitisation project to create content that could be available via the ACRE website e.g. newsletters, or on an internal portal to connect staff readily with ACRE history e.g. Board and Committee minutes and annual reports	Year 3
On the ACRE website direct visitors to sources of ACRE and RCC archives e.g. local record offices, the formal archive repository where the ACRE archive ends up being housed long-term.	On-going
ACRE to work with RCCs to help them think about how to use their archives in RCC work	On-going

## 7. Possible relationship with the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL)

For this report the author spoke to the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) at the University of Reading, to Caroline Gould (Archivist) and Guy Baxter (Head of Archive Services). They indicated a strong interest in talking to ACRE about the possibility of material being taken into the MERL archive. They would like to undertake more conversations with ACRE to explore this in detail. They will wait for ACRE to contact them. The author can supply contact emails.

There are several factors which ACRE should bear in mind when approaching MERL:

- Any proposals for collecting material need to be scrutinised by a dedicated collecting panel who will decide whether to accept an offer of material. This is a standard approach in professional archive and museum services.
- It would take time for MERL to come to a final decision – expect a process that might take 12 months given other demands on MERL’s time and the need to prepare and present a case to the collecting panel.
- If MERL decides in principle to accept material it will appraise out material that it does not consider to be of value to its collections e.g. duplicates, low value content, content not directly relevant to MERL collecting areas.
- MERL holds complementary collections that ACRE material may well enhance by providing another perspective
- MERL will have its own approach to cataloguing material and its own volunteers so it may take a different approach to the cataloguing of the ACRE collection from that proposed in Chapters 6 and 8.
- MERL has been made aware that there is a significant amount of material held by private individuals that could come forward. Whilst MERL has not commented on this material, ACRE should be aware that MERL may not have the capacity to assess all this additional material. This will be a point for discussion.
- The author has explained to MERL that there is material, such as that in the Margaret Clark collection, that is not from ACRE but gives valuable context. MERL fully understands this but also noted that its own collections are wide ranging and may well already contain a lot of this contextual material. So such material would need to be appraised by MERL to ensure it is not a duplicate of content MERL already holds and also to only take into its collections (should it choose to do so) content that adds meaningful value to those collections. Whilst it is not possible to say up front how much would be collected by MERL ACRE should be aware that it could be a very small amount of such material.



It should be noted that whilst MERL is the most obvious home for the ACRE collection Oxfordshire History Centre may also be a possibility as it was the location of the first RCC. However, the Centre's collecting approach is focused on collecting from the Oxfordshire region so it may not be interested in a national collection.

London Archives holds the NCVO collection so it could be argued that ACRE grew out of NCVO and could sit alongside the NCVO collection. However, London Archives is focused on collections relating to London and has very little if any material relating to the rural experience so again may not be a suitable home for the ACRE archive.



## 8. A possible cataloguing project

### 8.1 Introduction

Many archive repositories are very restricted in their resources and do not have much capacity for cataloguing. If ACRE were able to resource the cataloguing of its material that would make the material accessible much more quickly than a formal repository could manage through its own restricted resources. Furthermore, the offer from ACRE to resource the cataloguing would make its collection more attractive to any formal archive service that ACRE might approach for collecting its material.

It is possible that the ACRE archive and material held by individuals could be catalogued by volunteers with oversight from a professional archivist. This would significantly reduce the cost of a cataloguing project, draw on the knowledge individuals associated with ACRE by using former employees and/ or FAN members and develop skills within ACRE which could help it to secure its future archival content.

This chapter lays out a possible timescale and resourcing for a professionally led volunteer cataloguing scheme but also provides an indication of the cost and timescale if a full time archivist was employed. It should also be noted that when approaching funders volunteer time may be able to be counted as help-in-kind and thus act as matched funding to a funding bid e.g. the National Lottery Heritage Fund costs volunteer time at £20 per hour<sup>15</sup>.

It should be noted that each archive service, such as that at MERL, will have its own approach to delivering cataloguing projects and so may wish to take a different approach to the proposal laid out here.

### 8.2 Timescales

The ACRE material and that held by individuals does not constitute a large amount of material. It is estimated that a volunteer project to catalogue these collections in an Excel spreadsheet would take:

- 31 volunteer days - to box list, physically arrange, catalogue and put in archival packaging

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/national-lottery-grants-heritage-250k-10m/application-form-questions-and-help-notes-250k-10m-development-phase#heading-6>





- 12 days of a consultant archivist – survey the material, plan a methodology, design the catalogue in Excel (so it can then be exported into the dedicated cataloguing system used by the professional archive service that takes the collection), train volunteers, make site visits to oversee work, quality assure the catalogue and identify any GDPR<sup>16</sup> or copyright issues, and finish off the project

See Appendix 3 for the detailed calculations.

### 8.3 Costs

Under these timeframes the total estimated cost for the cataloguing project would be £10,720.

Cost	Basis for estimate	Estimated cost £
Professional consultant archivist	12 days at £650/day including expenses	7,800
Travel costs for volunteers	61 days i.e. 122 single trips at £10 per trip	1,220
Archival packaging		700
Two laptops	£500 each	1,000
<b>Total project cost</b>		<b>10,720</b>

This estimate does not include any rental of workspace for the project. Any project would need to be sited in a location which is readily accessible for volunteers. This could be at the location of whichever repository agrees to take in the ACRE material. The commercial heritage storage provider Restore provides office space for working on collections stored at its Upper Heyford<sup>17</sup> site at a cost of about £150 per day plus VAT.

Possible funders of such a project could include:

<sup>16</sup> General Data Protection Rules – the legal requirements that govern how organisations in the UK manage and use the personal data they hold relating to living individuals. See <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/> for more information

<sup>17</sup> Restore is one of two companies that provides commercial storage that meets professional archival standards <https://www.restore.co.uk/records/services/heritage-storage/>. The other is Deepstore in Cheshire <https://www.deepstore.com>



- 'Archives Revealed' – funded by The National Archives, The National Lottery, Wolfson Foundation and the Pilgrim Trust  
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-revealed/>
- Small National Lottery Heritage Grants £10k to £250k -  
<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/national-lottery-heritage-grants-10k-250k>
- Garfield Weston Foundation - <https://garfieldweston.org>

Other possible funders can be found here

<https://www.heritagefundingdirectoryuk.org/funding-sources/>.



## Appendix 1 – Key records from RCCs to be retained

Interviewees for this project commented that it would be useful to have guidance on what types of records RCCs should be identifying and forwarding on to their local county record office. The precise content will need to be agreed with the individual record office but the likely types of records will include the following:

- Annual reports and annual audited accounts
- AGM papers
- Board papers
- Papers of committees
- Publications and reports including guidance, survey results and evaluations of projects
- Parish plans
- Photographic material and possibly some audio-visual content
- Newspaper cuttings

These records provide a clear picture of the work of the RCC and the decision making process. Detailed records such as routine administration and financial records would not be retained.

The records of Sussex Rural Community Council, held at East Sussex Record Office, give a sense of the sorts of records a record office would accept  
[https://www.thekeep.info/collections/getrecord/GB179\\_RCC](https://www.thekeep.info/collections/getrecord/GB179_RCC)



## Appendix 2 – Interviewees

Louise Beaton OBE, ACRE Trustee/Community Halls Consultant & former ACRE National Village Halls Adviser
David Clark, Former Chief Rural Officer, NCVO
Charles Coats, ACRE Trustee/Current Chairman of Gloucestershire RCC
David Francis, Editor of 100 Years & Rural Recall (ACRE/FANs Website <a href="https://100ruralyears.uk">https://100ruralyears.uk</a> & Newsletter), Former Director of Community Action Northumberland
Charlotte Hursey, Former Director, Community Council of Humberside
Garry Jones, CEO of Staffordshire ACRE
Tom McCulloch, Joint CEO of Community First Oxfordshire
Peter Newell, Former Director of Community Council for Wiltshire
Barbara Piranty, CEO of Gloucestershire RCC
Doff Pollard, Former ACRE Trustee/Former Chief Officer of Tees Valley RCC
Peter Richardson, Communications and Publications Officer of Gloucestershire RCC
Steve Wheeler, former CEO of West of England Rural Network/ Avon RCC

## Appendix 3 – Cataloguing timescale calculations

<b>Volunteer time</b>	
<b>Size of collections</b>	
Collection	<b>Number of bankers' boxes</b>
ACRE	17
Papers of six individuals with 6 boxes per individual	36
Contingency	5
Total number of bankers' boxes	58
<b>Time to box list</b>	
	<b>No of hours</b>
Time required to box list each box	1
Time require to box list all collections	58
<b>Time to physically organise</b>	
	<b>No of hours</b>
Time required to physically organise each box	2
Time required to physically organise all the boxes	116
<b>Time to catalogue</b>	
	<b>No of hours</b>
Catalogue each box	3
Catalogue whole collection of ACRE and individuals' material	174
<b>Time to repackage into archival packaging</b>	
	<b>No of hours</b>
Time required to repackage each box	1
Time required to repackage all boxes	58
Total number of hours	406
Training time of say six volunteers at 3.5 hours per volunteer	21
Total number of hours	427
Total number of 7 hour volunteer days	61



<b>Professional archivist time</b>	<b>Number of 7 hour days</b>
Brief survey of collection	2
Development of methodology and Excel catalogue structure	2
Training of volunteers	2
Site visits to monitor project	4
Quality assure catalogue	2
Total number of 7 hour days	12