

Supporting and Speaking up for Rural Communities

ACRE's Corporate Plan 2022-2025



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Our ambition

All that we do is underpinned by our ambition that no-one living in a rural area should be disadvantaged by where they live. A brighter future is possible; one where all rural communities are well served, thriving and are welcoming places to live and work.

This Corporate Plan is focused on progressing that ambition, on speaking up for rural communities, on influencing policy, and on transforming our own services so that they are relevant, accessible to all and sustainable longer-term.

A Introduction

The ACRE Network is the largest rural entity wholly focused on supporting those who live and work in rural England. Thirty-eight members cover all the shire counties of England, with ACRE itself as the thirty-ninth, and national, member. As charities, our beneficiaries are all those living in the rural areas of England, but especially those who are at risk of isolation and disadvantage and for whom rurality brings additional challenge and cost to their daily lives.

Following a period of detailed consultation with members and stakeholders, this Corporate Plan highlights ACRE's priorities for the forthcoming few years and provides a framework for the more detailed Operational Plan which will be reviewed and updated on an annual basis. The audience for the Corporate Plan is primarily ACRE's members, funders and national stakeholders.

About the ACRE Network

The Network builds on over a century of work by a movement of local members dating back to 1920. ACRE itself was established in 1987 to champion and address the needs of England's rural communities. Collectively, the Network reaches over 35,000 community groups and 10,000+ village halls across England and in doing so it employs over 1,000 staff. It also benefits from the voluntary contribution and skills of some 300+ trustees who oversee the work of ACRE members locally.

The ACRE Network has proved to be a unique and effective delivery mechanism covering the whole of rural England, bringing services to, and providing intelligence on, rural communities. It acts as the conduit for national level priorities and programmes to be delivered locally whilst taking account of local circumstances, provision, and resources.

A survey undertaken during the pandemic indicated that during the previous 12-month period, ACRE members made contact with 8,000 community or village halls and with a further 27,000 other community groups and organisations. These figures demonstrate the Network's extensive local reach and access to ACRE's end beneficiaries.

About ACRE

ACRE itself provides national coordination, a collective voice and a conduit for members' information and intelligence. Its aim is to add value to ACRE members by utilising information and intelligence in a strategic, policy focused, way. It does this by:

- Using Network intelligence to inform consultation responses;
- Working with Government and other partners to influence and shape policy that affects our beneficiaries;
- Providing a forum to discuss rural community issues through conferences, policy position papers and formal consultation responses.

Through its work ACRE reflects the needs and aspirations of England's 9.3 million rural dwellers who remain an essential component of England's population, culture and economy.

ACRE has successfully delivered many programmes, most recently the Village Hall Improvement Grant, and it continues to deliver the National Village Hall Service, the DEFRA Grant in Aid Agreement and the Village Hall Loan Fund.

The organisation, which has a small staff team, moved to Woodstock, Oxfordshire in 2021 where it is alongside the Plunkett Foundation. Each member of staff has responsibility for specific areas of work although liaising with members, Government and other partners is a key part of every team member's role.

As a registered charity and company limited by guarantee, ACRE's Board of Trustees provide strategic oversight and ensure effective governance¹.

B ACRE's vision

We want:

- Rural communities that are thriving and sustainable and which have the services needed to ensure equity for all residents.
- To achieve rural places that are fully engaged in the UK's future policies and ambitions.

Our mission

We aim to achieve this vision by working with the members of the ACRE Network and other key stakeholders to provide the evidence of the changing needs of rural communities.

Using that evidence, we will inform and influence at a national level, speaking up as the voice of those communities across England; and enabling our members at county level to deliver programmes of support to their rural communities.

Our beneficiaries

All people living in rural areas of England, but especially those who are at risk of isolation and disadvantage and for whom rurality brings additional challenge and cost to their daily lives.

¹ See www.acre.org.uk for more information

C ACRE's approach

As part of the ACRE Network, collectively we are committed to the following principles and objectives²:

Principles

- Acting as a champion and facilitator for sustainable rural communities;
- Using community development principles to empower people to explore and address the issues that they and their communities face.

Objectives

- Improve the lives of people living and working in rural communities;
- Support and encourage community-led action and strong local governance;
- Increase long-term sustainability of local community life;
- Influence policies and services to help address both market failure and the limitations of Government policy associated with rurality.

Our continuing transformation

ACRE's previous Business Plan focused on transforming the services delivered by ACRE, and on improving and developing its relationship with members to ensure maximum reach and benefit for England's rural communities. This successful journey of transformation will continue over this new Corporate Plan period 2022 – 2025.

Leaving the EU and then the Coronavirus pandemic have prompted a reappraisal, not just by ACRE but more widely, of recent changes many of which are important to the future of rural communities.

ACRE's journey of transformation will both recognise these challenges and also harness the opportunities they bring to further develop and modernise its approach and services.

One of the most significant challenges is the climate emergency. ACRE members see this as a high priority in their work with local communities. With transition to **Net Zero**³ a key national policy objective the ACRE Network is uniquely placed to support rural communities across England to make this a reality.

The Network is also well placed to contribute to the '**levelling-up**' agenda, as it becomes clearer as to how this will be taken forward. Members have good working relationships with Local Authorities and extensive reach into those communities disadvantaged by rurality, providing opportunities to ensure rural communities benefit from this policy focus. ACRE's role here will be to work with both Government and other rural organisations to ensure a strong understanding of how opportunity for rural people can be realised, ensuring community-led initiatives form a significant part of the Government's strategy to achieve this and that the required resources are made available.

Within the context of these wider challenges ACRE will also retain a focus on **affordable rural housing, accessible rural services, community buildings** and **community empowerment**. These are the foundations of sustainability and part of the lived experience of rural communities and ACRE's end beneficiaries.

² ACRE Network Concordat adopted by all 39 members; November 2016

³ The UK's target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

D What we will do and aim to achieve

Through our members, **what ACRE will do** in this plan is to support rural communities by delivering capacity building programmes and by garnering intelligence on the impact of policy on the ground in order to influence and shape policy at a national level. As the nationally focused member of the Network, ACRE will:

- Gather **evidence and conduct research** to improve outcomes for rural communities;
- Articulate a **voice for rural communities** at a national level;
- **Influence** decisions that impact on rural communities;
- **Deliver** programmes through our members which directly improve the lives of our beneficiaries and which increase the resilience of rural communities.

Responding to members' requests, ACRE's **policy work** has developed significantly in recent years and will continue to be a priority over this plan period.

What ACRE will aim to achieve in respect of the key challenges and opportunities facing rural communities over the next few years will be guided by eight high level policy aims. The cross-cutting aim of our policy work is to **achieve rural places that are fully engaged in the UK's future policies and ambitions.**

The **eight policy aims** which have the endorsement of all ACRE members are to support rural places where:-

1. Everyone can play a full part in their community;
2. There is affordable housing for every generation;
3. Everyone receives the care they need regardless of their circumstances;
4. There is opportunity for all, particularly those starting out in life;
5. The local economy makes it possible for everyone to reach their full potential;
6. People consciously live in balance with the environment;
and rural places that are:
7. Connected to each other and the world;
8. Generous, welcoming and inclusive;
9. Fully engaged in the UK's future policies and ambitions.

Our policy work will be focused on gathering evidence and, where resources permit, undertaking original research, and then utilising this to influence the policy and strategy of national stakeholders including Government.

We will keep our policy aims under regular review, undertaking annual campaigns to raise awareness of our own, and our members', work on behalf of end beneficiaries. We will develop partnerships with other stakeholder organisations working in these arenas and capture best practice in order to secure more support and resources.

Alongside our policy and influencing work we will also continue to:-

- Collaborate with key partners,
- Develop and deliver national programmes *and*
- Support ACRE Network members.

E How we will operate

Underpinning the ACRE Network’s ability to deliver sits the Government’s investment in the Network. Securing and managing the delivery of this investment over the plan period will remain a key priority for ACRE.

As the national, and thirty-ninth member, of the ACRE Network we will support our members by convening practitioners and senior leaders for mutual support, training, and the sharing of best practice. We will also offer strategic support to individual members during periods of organisational change to ensure the integrity and universality of the services provided by the ACRE Network across rural England.

To ensure that our services have maximum reach we will continue to embrace digital solutions and improve our marketing and communications activity. We will build on ISO 9001, the quality standard adopted recently on our journey of continuous improvement. We will review our village halls information services to ensure universality, sustainability, and an effective succession strategy for its delivery longer term.

In recognition of the recent centenary celebrations and renewed interest in the history of the ACRE Network we will support and embed this work as resources permit.

During the plan period ACRE will experience several important governance changes including the recruitment and induction of a new chair. We will ensure that these succession challenges are as smooth and seamless as possible and that the confidence of funders and stakeholders is maintained throughout.

To address the capacity and resourcing issues within ACRE we will pursue a blended and balanced approach to our funding strategy including:

- Government funding;
- Membership income;
- Trusts and foundation grants;
- Corporate sponsorship;
- Earned income and continued support for shared Network initiatives.

ACRE’s staff team will remain small but with the ability to increase capacity as required, including utilising expertise from the Network or from elsewhere on a freelance basis to enhance the organisation’s skills, experience, knowledge and delivery. Trustees will provide oversight and effective governance, complying with the Charity Code of Governance (2020) over the lifetime of this Corporate Plan.

F Outcomes of our work

Outcome 1

Those who want to **engage with rural communities** or understand the impact of future policy change **will come to ACRE** to access expertise and information.

Outcome 2

Through **ACRE and its members working closely together**, rural policy at the local and national level **will be influenced and improved**.

Outcome 3

Rural communities across England will benefit from **consistent access** to ACRE Network services.