

Civil society in rural England

Summary and conclusions

The intention in this paper is to:

1. Summarise what the ACRE Network has learned about rural place-communities over 100 years of working alongside them, both with practical assistance and speaking up for their interests.
2. Identify what is distinctive about rural place-communities, and therefore bring some insights into how support can best be directed to them over the next 100 years
3. Build on the ACRE Network's objective of ensuring that nobody living in a rural area is unreasonably disadvantaged by where they live.

Civil society is an essential part of the fabric of rural life. The reasons don't only flow from the distinctive nature of rural communities, outlined below, but also from the wider need that all of society has for mutual understanding and cohesion between its members.

Even with the most enlightened and well-resourced economic and environmental policies, without a strong civil society in rural areas, there is a real danger that villages become just pretty but unsustainable collections of houses set in a beautiful and bio-diverse landscape. The absence of a place-community can result in intolerance, selfishness and the 'othering' of anyone who is different, either within or beyond the local area.

At a very practical level, rural civil society is important because rural areas have a distinct and place-based local governance that leads to decisions being made in a way that can most accurately reflect local needs. Almost all rural villages have a long experience of both owning and managing a physical asset such as a village hall, recreation ground or youth centre, and more recently community shop or affordable housing development.

Many local services are now delivered on a social enterprise basis and through this reach the parts of the rural community that commercial business models cannot. Community businesses, and also the more obviously charitable local civil organisations, are able to see the links between different local needs and available resources. This enables them to find ways of joining-up public and voluntary services for greater effectiveness.

Very local groups and organisations can act knowing that they have the support of their community and also in the knowledge that much of their informal activity is often invisible to the outside, only known within the community and reaching the places where action is most needed.

In conclusion, a strong civil society in rural areas is just as important as that in urban and suburban areas; it does, however, have some very distinct characteristics that make it especially important to rural places.

Initiatives to support and strengthen rural communities, if they take account of these differences, will repay the investment many times over.

1. Introduction

The intention in this paper is to:

1. Summarise what the ACRE Network has learned about rural place-communities over 100 years of working alongside them, both with practical assistance and speaking up for their interests.
2. Identify what is distinctive about rural place-communities, and therefore bring some insights into how support can best be directed to them over the next 100 years
3. Build on the ACRE Network's experience of working with rural place-communities with the express intention of ensuring that nobody in a rural area is unreasonably disadvantaged by where they live.

Life in a rural area can be a very different and distinct experience to living in one of England's major towns, cities or suburbs. For those with financial means it can be a good life, for those without it can be a grinding story of poor access, distant public services and limited choice. One distinctive element is the different way in which civil society operates when it relates to a specific rural place.

As a network that has worked with rural communities for so long ACRE, its county members and networks of community groups, are as well positioned as anyone to give an answer to the question: what is distinct about civil society in rural England?

We offer this view to all the Government and civil society organisations with whom we work. We do so as a contribution to planning the recovery from the extraordinary events of 2020.

2. What is a rural?

This should be a straightforward question but, unfortunately, often it is not. It is important first to be clear about what a rural area is before looking at the characteristics of a rural community.

Many organisations have different views and policies about what constitutes 'rural', and these can have a real impact on how rural communities are then treated by them. As an example, ACRE has recently experienced urban focused England-wide organisations choosing only to include settlements of more than 3000 people in their definition of a 'community'; and others who have defined 'rural' as only settlements of less than 3000 people. In this way, carelessly applied definitions can, it seems, define 'rural communities' out of existence entirely! This has practical consequences for policy.

17% of England's population live in rural areas, about the same proportion that live in London. This % is based on the Office of National Statistics and DEFRA urban/rural definition. This is our preferred definition as it is accurate down to relatively small areas and helps relate a range of other information and statistics to the practicalities of rurality.

One of our nation's most important institutions, the NHS, sets as its smallest unit of 'community' or neighbourhood at around 30k to 50k population, the number that typify the catchment area of around three modern, urban, primary care practices. In cities or towns this would be a large, identifiable neighbourhood, whilst in a rural area the same number of people could live in several small towns and many smaller villages. All are distinct communities with a character, history, civil society, community owned assets and governance unique to themselves.

It may be thought that agriculture and land management are, in large part, what comes to define a rural area. This is actually only a small part of the story, important though these industries often are. Of those who live in rural communities only around 9% are occupied in farming, land management or directly related upstream/downstream employment. Self-

employment, employment in small business and home-based work are all significantly greater in rural areas. Apart from these, types of employment are not significantly different to the national picture, although this does depend on whether it is measured by residence or place of work.

3. Who lives in rural areas?

First it is important to recognise that all rural areas and places are not the same, any more than all urban areas are the same. The people who live in them are just as diverse as in urban areas.

Often, but especially in relation to disadvantage, health and life expectancy, it is stated that rural areas are statistically 'better off' than urban ones. Of course, this is not true; places are not disadvantaged, people are; and there is just as wide a range of privilege and disadvantage in rural areas as in urban ones. The proportions may be different, but the range is as wide.

People who are disadvantaged can very easily become hidden in rural areas just as wealth and privilege is capable of hiding as well, if it chooses. Those who are on lower, fixed or uncertain incomes have much less choice in rural areas and less good access to the support services that may be available elsewhere. Any response to the needs of those who are disadvantaged has to be specific and personal, rather than being based on larger numbers with the same needs.

People's relationship to their work is different to that in urban places since employment opportunities are often fewer and there is less scope for members of one household to pursue different specialised work or career paths. Because there are fewer employers employment can be more fragile and alter the power balance between employer and employee. This can be hard for young people making their way in the world and, combined with high housing costs and a wider urban-dominated culture, can be one reason why young people tend to move away.

The population age range has, for several years, drifted upwards leaving many rural places 'hollowed out' with many fewer people of working age than the UK's national average. Older people, already asset rich from a working life in a more urban area, can easily out-compete younger people for housing and are often reluctant to see the place to which they have moved change after they have arrived. This, coupled with a planning system that has increasingly identified small rural places as 'unsustainable' and therefore denied them development, has created the conditions for a downward spiral of reducing local services, ageing population and risk of ossification.

4. What is distinctive about civil society in rural places?

In some ways the very concept and definition of civil society is different in rural areas. It would be strange, for instance, not to include the unique, closest, form of local government – the Parish Council – in the mix of what constitutes civil life, whereas a more distant County or Borough Council would be seen as part of the state.

Some of what makes civil society distinct is simple descriptive fact. Overall, however, the aim here is to identify what is distinctive, can make a positive contribution to the public good, can create a 'space' within which community happens and is also independent of the profit motive or market. In short, it is what makes a rural community more than just a collection of houses set in an attractive landscape; more than just a place.

This is helpfully looked at under seven headings:

1. Governance and collective action
2. Community owned assets
3. Reciprocity
4. Contribution
5. Community subsidy
6. Economies of scope
7. Permissions
8. The informal economy

4.1. Governance and collective action

Most rural communities have a **Parish or Town Council**. This is a formal, elected tier of local government that does not exist in most urban areas. They can tax, borrow and exercise very wide powers if properly run. This is not a voluntary organisation and should not be confused with anything to do with the Church – as the writers of *The Vicar of Dibley* managed to do! All have a paid, usually part time Clerk who acts as their 'accountable officer'.

However, unlike any other form of local 'state' in urban areas the Parish Council operates alongside other civil institutions that share its responsibility for the same place and together create a focus for community action that in turn creates a place-community.

[\[Published version: Example of Parish Councils working with/supporting VH Trustees\]](#)

4.2. Community owned assets

Most rural communities will have one or more physical assets which they own, so there is a long experience of asset management. Usually these will take the form of a **Village Hall, recreation ground and allotments**. Increasingly, **affordable housing schemes, community shops, local youth facilities and pubs** are being added to these assets. These are usually owned and run by the Parish Council or a local unincorporated charity with local Trustees. The transition to CIC or Company Limited by Guarantee is starting to happen. These are no longer the draughty Victorian pile of popular imagination, the model village hall is a modern and welcoming community building in many villages.

The value of these community assets, their ownership by the place-community and the serious nature of being responsible for valuable resources handed down through the generations creates a resilience and capacity within the community that would be hard to create under other circumstances.

4.3. Reciprocity

Civil society is often closely tied in with notions of charity and philanthropy, as well as the more formalised democratic and state structures that form part of civil society. At its heart charity is, in turn, focused on beneficiaries, leading to an assumption that all charity is largely a one-way street where some donate (time, money, skills) whilst others receive. However rural civil society has never been this clear. People participate in their local community in rural areas from a wide range of mixed motivations and often from an interest in mutual benefit; **it can be far from obvious who is giving and who receiving**. Yet for activity to be deemed legally 'charitable', and to have the benefits that go with this, 'beneficiaries' must be identified, however inappropriate doing so may be.

4.4. Contribution

Asking someone in a village if they have time to volunteer a few hours for a voluntary organisation is likely to prompt a reply that they are much too busy in the village to do any volunteering. On examination they might be on the cleaning rota for the Village Hall, keep the books for the Playgroup and drive the community minibus twice a week. **They do not see this commitment to where they live as 'volunteering'; it is simply part of the social contract, and tradition, that comes with living in a village.** The obligations that accompany the ownership and management of assets by the community make this part of community life feel much more 'responsible' than the term volunteer would sometimes suggest. Efforts to use urban styles of 'limited job role' volunteering in rural areas often fail by not understanding this culture.

4.5. Community subsidy

Urban communities are economically served by both commercial and public bodies. The first because there is a big enough market to achieve commercial viability eg. bus services; the second because the unit cost to serve a denser population is lower and makes a public sector budget go further eg. libraries. Rural people either pick up the cost of getting to an urban based service or provide their own. By providing for themselves, the people who live in rural communities provide **an additional source of subsidy through their voluntary activity** to fill the gaps that are left eg. a community transport scheme or a volunteer run library in the Village Hall.

National data backs up our qualitative view that the growth of social enterprise, Community Interest Companies and community businesses has been led by rural areas as these are places where commercial entities are less able to find a viable market.

[Published version: [Good Neighbour/Transport scheme?](#)]

4.6. Economies of scope

Failure of the market to provide rural communities with some services has a second consequence. Civil society in rural areas has become very adept at replacing economies of scale with local economies of scope. The Village Hall is the prime example but not the only one. A single building acts as theatre, badminton court, pre-school, Council office, lunch club and café. There are insufficient economies of scale for all of these to have their own premises, but there are large enough economies of scope if they all share one. Added to the community subsidy outlined above, this can make the difference between many services being viable or not. **The focus of the multi-use facility is the place-community, the place and its local systems**, not just the individual activities that happen within it. This is very different to the organisational focus of charity and civil society in urban areas.

[Published version: [Village Agent, multiple shared delivery, sharing of funding](#)]

4.7. Permissions

In a small settlement community activity is highly visible. Starting something new or preventing something valuable from failing will only happen if the community, in a barely definable way, gives its 'permission'. In an urban area a national charity can establish a new branch or a new outlet for its service; a few enthusiastic people can set up something new, purely through their own zeal or local government can hive off one of its activities to a 'new' charity. **In a rural community, permission to act, and even more importantly, permission to try, but fail, is essential.** This is a key part of the way in which rural communities work that is poorly understood by those coming into them with an urban model of activity in mind. Every village is different and so is the source of this 'permission', understanding it is key to unlocking the social capital of the place-community.

4.8 The informal economy

Many rural places have a very well developed 'informal' economy. Whatever the fiscal propriety of this, informal economies are good at distributing 'goods' at times of crises (and at other times) by adopting **a wider range of exchange mechanisms than money**. These include gifting, reciprocity, barter, non-monetary exchange and local exchange trading schemes.

5. Conclusion

Civil society is an essential part of the fabric of rural life. The reasons don't only flow from its distinctive nature, outlined above, but also from the wider need that all of society has for mutual understanding and cohesion.

Without a strong civil society in rural areas there is a real danger that the interests of the individual and their family stops, dead, at the front door and rural places become just collections of houses in a beautiful and bio-diverse landscape. The absence of a place-community can result in intolerance, selfishness and the 'othering' of anyone who is different. At a very practical level, and in relation to the distinctive characteristics identified above, it is also important because:

1. Local governance, both through formal institutions such as the Parish Council and local voluntary groups, leads to decisions that more accurately reflect local needs and local priorities.
2. Ownership vested in the community makes it more likely that people will value what is collectively theirs, be encouraged to protect and enhance it and build the capacity of all in the community.
3. Local actions arising from mutual self-interest and mutual-support do not lessen the contract between the state and the individual, but they do add a richness and a quality that enhances the lives of all in these communities including those at risk of disadvantage from their rurality.
4. The contribution that people make to local services delivered on a social enterprise model helps to reach the parts of the rural community that commercial business models cannot.
5. Local people, working together through civil organisations, are better able to see the links between different local needs and resources, and better placed to find joined-up ways of serving them in the most efficient and effective way.
6. Very local civil organisations can act in the knowledge that their community supports what they are doing and will back them up.
7. Informal activity is often invisible to the outside, only very local civil organisations will be known within the community and reach the places where action is most needed.

In conclusion, a strong civil society in rural areas is just as important as that in urban and suburban areas. It does, however, have some very distinct characteristics that make it especially important to rural places. Initiatives to support and strengthen rural communities, must take account of these differences.

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