

Rural equalities – ACRE Network policy.

Introduction

ACRE is a national charity whose charitable purposes, and those of its Network Members, are centred on its beneficiaries:

“People living in rural areas and especially those most at risk of disadvantage as a result of their rurality.”

ACRE's promotion of policies at UK Government level are intended to achieve an improvement in the living conditions of these beneficiaries. The practical action of our Network Members is to support community action intended to achieve the same end.

Our national, cross-cutting, policy objectives are straightforward:

1. National commitment towards rural people and communities

The UK Government, or a future Government through long term commitment from all political parties, must make a high-level commitment to a UK and England Rural Communities Strategy with measurable, deliverable commitment both from all home departments and from local government.

2. Cost of access for rural people

The UK Treasury must make policy a commitment to 1. factoring end-recipient distance costs into the delivery of public services and 2. requiring Departments' business case appraisals for services to rural areas to understand that competition and markets cannot deliver either quality or equity of access in very rural areas.

3. Co-design of delivery of rural public services

Creation of a long term 'invest to save' rural services fund at national level that will be used to provide a positive incentive to all commissioning agencies to improve their outcomes with rural people. This is a means of enabling the pooling of resources and sharing of delivery arrangements with rural communities to create non-cashable savings in the form of better outcomes for the same resource input.

Underpinning these objectives is a fundamental belief that there should be equality of opportunity for rural people and opportunities for them to be engaged in how services are delivered. In other words, nobody living in a rural area will be unreasonable disadvantaged in their access to public services by where they live.

However, it is not possible to use the terms 'equality of opportunity' without also being clear about how ACRE's use of the term relates to its wider use.

Equal opportunities

Equal opportunities are part of wider society's innate desire to achieve fairness and equity towards all people, whatever their circumstances or characteristics, and are now bound up in international conventions on human rights. In practice it is not just about a society being fair and equitable to its citizens, it is also about making the most of society's diverse human resources for the benefit of all:

1. It gives everyone an equal opportunity to participate in their community and actively prevents anyone being discriminated against as a result of things over which they have no control or choice (protected characteristics).
2. It seeks to ensure that everyone can make the greatest contribution to society of which they are theoretically capable. To achieve this, society actively removes barriers that are either created by society itself (gender, race etc) or that can be overcome with society's help (disability, language etc.)

Rural equality of opportunity for the individual

We do not believe it would be practical to consider 'rurality' as a protected characteristic in the same way as those bound up in equalities legislation, there are however, parallels that can be drawn. There are often situations in which rural dwellers are treated with neither equity nor equivalence and can have little control over this. The frequent assumption is that they have a greater choice than is, in reality, available.

A choice is only a choice if it can be taken. For rural people to exercise a choice to achieve better access to services then they would have to be able to relocate somewhere else. Many have little option due to being 'locked into' low cost accommodation or lack the means to move. Others have limited choice due to their age eg. a fifteen-year-old choosing their educational progression or local obligations eg. someone combining local work with care for a relative.

As a result, we believe that rurality needs to be seen as a factor (alongside a number of others including homelessness, addiction, mental illness...) that has the potential to exacerbate disadvantage, isolation and poor access to services especially for those on lower incomes or in poor quality employment.

A thriving society and thriving rural communities

If rural communities, like urban ones, are to thrive, it is in the whole of society's interests to ensure rural people can make a full contribution to society. It should not require the 'big stick' of equalities legislation for this to be an essential requirement of a just society:

- Society creates problems for itself if people growing up in rural areas cannot access a high-quality education and, as a result, risk entering adult life with low skills, low expectations and a sense of resentment against 'urban elites'. It would be unacceptable to treat minority ethnic communities in this way, so why should it be acceptable to do so for young people growing up in some rural areas?
- Society will create dependency amongst 'left behind' rural communities if, in the long term, it fails to do what is reasonably possible to overcome barriers to equal treatment for people living in rural areas.
- Rural and urban areas are part of one society; it would be foolish to simply dispense with the talents and potential of 17% of the population on the sole grounds that the price tag of granting them equality of opportunity and equality of access to services is perceived to be too great. This would be a grossly unacceptable philosophy if adopted for disabled people living anywhere.
- It is in nobody's interests, least of all those who live there, for rural communities to become home only to the narrow cross section of society who can afford the house price 'entry ticket'. A wide range of occupational types are needed everywhere and these carry with them an equally wide cross section of incomes; it would be fantasy to think that all jobs in the local 'foundation' economy can compete with incomes derived from the urban/global advanced economy.
- Active rural communities can combine being both small and diverse; this enables community life to bring together people from widely different backgrounds; people who, in an urban conurbation, could choose only to mix with those similar to themselves. This can only be a benefit for tolerance in wider society

The ACRE Network will aim to ensure that the impact of rurality on some parts of the population is well understood and can be mitigated in the same way as other factors that exacerbate disadvantage. This will also have the advantage of providing policy makers with a 'thought process' that can easily be applied. It will also allow the Network to differentiate between our most critical ultimate beneficiaries – those for whom rurality can pose an additional source of disadvantage - and others for whom living in a rural area is an unqualified benefit

Jeremy Leggett, May 2019