



## **Policy Position Paper: Rural Challenges**

***Local people in rural communities must be re-introduced to real local democracy. Given the opportunity to shape and take decisions, they will be far more sensitive to the value and potential for change and more willing to contribute their own efforts to making it happen.***

### **Summary**

Rural communities are at a cross-roads. Action is essential if we are to generate more sustainable communities and lifestyles and offer better quality of life for all who live in the countryside, not just the affluent who can afford to live there. With global pressures such as climate change, an ageing population and long lasting constraints on public spending, it is time to generate a new vision for our rural communities that delivers better services in different ways. Only then can we provide for the needs of both current and future generations that live, work and play in the countryside.

The Rural Community Action Network believes that the solution lies in:

- enabling and encouraging communities to take more control of their own future,
- providing more services locally and
- communities working in closer partnership with local government and others to reduce isolation from centres of influence and power.

With 9,000 community-owned village halls and 7,500 parish and town councils, England's rural communities are already more self-reliant than their urban counterparts. Local community groups provide the social infrastructure that provides mutual support to compensate for lack of access to more distant services.

In facing up to future challenges of the future, local residents will continue to draw on that tradition of self-help and respond to fill gaps in services through local community action. The future also provides opportunities for the countryside and its physical assets in providing food and energy resources. We believe local communities should foster the growth of locally owned initiatives and harness the power of local assets and new technology to find new ways of meeting future needs.

Rural communities need a supportive context for this to happen – fewer constraints on planning, intelligent funding rather than just more funding, an effective dialogue with external partners to find new ways of delivering services and, crucially, access to support and advice to help them realise their aspirations.

### **ACRE's rural vision**

**Our vision is that rural communities will increasingly take a leading role in ensuring the social, environmental and economic well-being of all their residents. They will do this in a way that provides for the present generation and also plans for future needs and future challenges. RCAN members will be there to stimulate their thinking, support their work and help turn their aspirations into reality.**

### **Rural Challenge 1: Long lasting constraints on public spending**

The current economic recession may be short-lived, but public spending is likely to be reduced for many years to come. Rural communities will feel the highest impact of spending cuts, because of the higher cost and the lower economies of scale in delivery. For the 20% of the rural population that experience some form of poverty or disadvantage, this impact will be severe and long-lasting. If rural communities are to respond and plan for the future, then they need to embark on discussions with service providers to retain, enhance or introduce new services through joint effort. The result, in many cases, will be different ways of delivering rural services better suited to the needs of those communities, combined with a welcome decrease in cost.

#### **Solution**

RCAN's long experience of **community led planning** shows how their approach to empowering local people to create and deliver their own vision of their future can result in generating significant community action towards making it happen. Research has shown that nearly 50% of the actions in a community led plan are taken forward by the community itself (see [www.communityledplanning.com](http://www.communityledplanning.com) ).

Those local authorities and public services providers who have seen the value of building their 'engagement strategies' on community led planning discover there are additional benefits to the approach that fulfils their own objectives – more efficient and effective service delivery and better local democracy through higher voter turnout and more candidates standing at elections.

Community led planning is often the first stage in stimulating new ideas for harnessing the potential of the local area and land-based assets. New projects may meet economic, social or environmental objectives, or, more often, combinations of all three. However, to succeed in turning these ideas into action and sustaining progress, local groups require continuity in support and help in brokering relationships with public service providers. The seamless transition from facilitating community led planning to providing dedicated support to grow and sustain initiatives is a unique characteristic of the member organisations in the Rural Community Action Network.

### **Rural Challenge 2: An ageing population**

Rural communities are ageing far faster than urban communities. As elderly residents become more frail and require increased support and access to care services, most have little choice other than to leave the community to find more suitable accommodation. The high cost of fuel in rural areas with no mains gas mean fuel poverty is a very real issue for many. Difficulties in accessing centralised care services in more distant towns becomes expensive, particularly when there is no public or community-owned transport upon which to rely. Most elderly residents rely more than most on the provision of services within the community and on support from friends, neighbours and family for ensuring their needs are met. But with increasing demographic mobility, such support networks can often disappear as people move on.

#### **Solution**

RCAN members believe that elderly people are often the backbone of local community organisations and that the community itself can help ensure they maintain their independence. Communities can foster local social networks, enhance local services and, in particular, provide community-based transport when it is needed through volunteer car or good neighbour schemes.

Those who advocate for more affordable housing in rural areas often focus on the needs of young people and young families who would otherwise not be able to live and work locally. However creating vibrant communities through encouraging younger families to stay in the village also provides a boost

to the viability of local services such as shops and community facilities which are the very lifelines that elderly people themselves require to be able to enjoy adequate quality of life.

Rural communities need this kind of integrated thought about their future, rather than tackling problems in isolation. One option is community support for multi-purpose developments that are designed to meet a variety of residents needs. For example, workspace to help foster emerging businesses, provision of community services and a community-owned shop or even a microgeneration project to provide cheaper local energy. These could all be combined in one community-led, possibly community-owned initiative. This vision will take time to allow the appropriate context to develop – better planning decisions that foster community led projects, public service agencies that actively support such innovative approaches and investment to make it happen. The payback is that the community becomes more sustainable in the long run and services are viable because of local volunteer effort.

ACRE manages the national network of rural housing enablers who work within communities to identify needs and seek solutions by making connections with local authorities, landowners and housing providers. On the back on RCAN member support for community led plans, these formal assessments can help secure recognition of the scale of local need. Evidence shows that this can gain the support of the community in bringing forward new and appropriate sites for housing schemes which would otherwise have met with local opposition.

### **Rural Challenge 3: Climate Change affects us all.**

Among the most critical challenges faced by rural communities are those of climate change, the decline in local services and risk to global oil supplies. Creating sustainable rural communities requires a fresh look at how local people and community groups can jointly tackle the future, maintain the viability of their services and help deliver quality of life for all. Local communities need to adapt and respond to the challenges associated with climate change and resource depletion, both for their own benefit and for society as a whole. Current issues of fossil fuel energy use and associated greenhouse gas emissions are a concern for many people and if not tackled now will affect future generations.

### **Solution**

For decades ACRE and the Rural Community Action Network have been developing local and national initiatives to support strong rural communities. Using shared knowledge and experience and our links with grass roots community action, ACRE and RCAN can provide guidance and support to meet the challenges ahead. Community Led Plans provide communities with a chance to reflect on and contribute to sustainable living. Often many of the actions that communities propose unwittingly contribute to this goal without being a specific aim such as the promotion of local produce and community transport schemes, whilst others take a more proactive approach to environmental issues.

### **About ACRE**

Action with Communities in Rural England is the national umbrella body of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), which operates at national, regional and local level in support of rural communities across the country. We aim to promote a healthy, vibrant and sustainable rural community sector that is well connected to policy and decision-makers who play a part in delivering this aim. ACRE is nationally recognised for its expertise in ensuring rural community-led solutions are central to public policy debate.

ACRE is a member of:

- Homes & Communities Agency Rural Housing Advisory Group

- Age UK Rural Advisory Group
- Ministerial Task Force on climate change, the environment and sustainable development
- The new national rural coalition, under the chairmanship of Matthew Taylor MP, which aims to take forward his 2008 proposals to government on a Living, Working, Countryside.

## **RCAN Rural Community Action Network**

The Rural Community Action Network comprises 38 Rural Community Councils (RCCs) at local level, RCC regional groupings and their national arm in ACRE, providing coverage of all rural areas throughout England. RCCs are county-based, independent, local development agencies that, for decades, have been delivering support on the ground to enable rural communities to improve quality of life for all. They act as a strategic voice for rural communities, allowing grassroots issues to be championed and solutions worked out in partnership between statutory, voluntary and private sector providers. Their strength lies in their ability to work within communities in an inclusive and holistic way, helping local people to develop local solutions and identify unmet needs through a unique approach to community-led planning. Alongside this, RCCs provide a trusted local support network for rural community groups, including dedicated expertise in arenas such as transport, housing, the management of community-owned facilities, social enterprise and rural services.

## **RCAN National coverage, local reach**

Members of the Rural Community Action Network have a long history of supporting communities to find solutions to their needs. We do this by supporting all sections of the community to plan for the future and by developing relevant services that meet the needs of all generations. We do this with a passion for social inclusion, and high standards throughout the network.

### Network members

- Provide genuine reach into rural communities across England, linking national, regional and local policy with community action at the grassroots
- Promote and develop local solutions that benefit the social, environmental and economic well-being of communities
- Act as a focal point for partners across statutory, private and voluntary sectors, working together to benefit rural communities
- Tackle disadvantage by ensuring their work within rural communities reaches out to marginalised groups and encourages the development of local services for those least able to travel

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**This document is one of a series covering the following topics, Rural Challenges, Community Led Planning, Climate Change, Rural Community Buildings, Housing, Rural Services, Transport, Sustainable Communities, Social Inclusion, Older People, Children & Young People, Healthcare and Digital Inclusion.**

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