

ACRE Policy Position Paper:



Community Led Planning

Community Led Planning (CLP) enables local people to create stronger, more vibrant and more resilient communities, better able to respond to local challenges and opportunities. It represents genuine value for money, as communities across the country take on responsibility for making things happen, rather than waiting for others to do it for them.

ACRE and RCAN have worked to empower communities across England by supporting and developing the concept of CLP for over 20 years. CLP is a step-by-step structured process, enabling every citizen to participate in and contribute to, improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of their local area.

Different approaches to CLP have developed to suit different geographical contexts. These include: Parish Plans, Market Town Healthchecks/Action Plans and increasingly, Neighbourhood-led Plans in urban communities. Common to all of these approaches are a number of overarching principles. A CLP is:

- produced by and for a community and takes between 12 to 18 months to complete
- grounded in thorough research and consultation organised by the community
- a shared vision for the future of the whole community
- about local people contributing their own efforts to bringing about that vision
- about communities making links with organisations that can provide them with practical help and guidance

Rural communities are changing as a result of global challenges and constraints to public spending. We need to reinvigorate local democracy if we are to have truly sustainable and resilient communities.

Greater devolution to local authorities aims to make them more efficient and responsive to local community needs. There is also a new understanding about the benefits of local people having a greater say in decision-making. However, in contrast to other 'top-down' approaches to empowerment, Community Led Planning (CLP) also generates local community action producing better value solutions along with new locally-owned initiatives meeting future needs.

Built on 20 years of experience in delivering the concept of CLP in over 4,000 communities across England, evidence shows that it offers a unique framework for encouraging genuine community empowerment. It provides an opportunity for communities to explore local priorities, grow more cohesive and, by harnessing local community action, tackle head-on the provision of services, climate change and resource depletion.

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.

Issue: Less dependent, more prosperous communities

Global challenges have damaged local economies throughout the country. The anticipated cuts in public expenditure will continue to impact on the sustainability of local communities and the services on which they rely. This is a particular challenge for rural communities who are reliant on a limited range of employers and where public service provision is often more costly per head of population.

Solution: community involvement

CLP generates the community's interest in solving local problems, meets local challenges and generates more voluntary effort to develop local solutions. By stimulating dialogue between stakeholders that have an interest in the local area, knowledge and resources are pooled making it possible to achieve many actions that contribute to the development of the locality without the direct intervention of external agencies.

Over seven years in the East of England region, 231 communities created Community Led Plans that contained over 9,000 individual actions to improve their locality. 47% of the actions were able to be taken on by the community themselves without external support. Of the remainder, 34% required negotiation with public service providers to bring them to fruition.

Over 18 months in West Berkshire, it was estimated that volunteers collectively contributed 211,635 hours of their time towards the organisation, research and write-up of 45 separate Community Led Plans. This figure excludes the amount of time the community subsequently spent implementing actions. If this was costed at the volunteering rate of £7.50 per hour, this equates to £3,989,430 in one county alone. This shows that, when offered the opportunity to make a difference, local people respond by contributing their own efforts.

A Community Led Plan produced by a community in Kington St Michael, North Wiltshire focused on creating a better trading environment for local businesses. Six monthly 'business breakfasts' were set up for local businessmen to be able to network, make use of each others services and collaborate on joint issues of concern. A particular outcome was the re-opening of a previously closed post office which is now owned and run by the community themselves.

Issue: Strengthening local democracy

Citizens have become increasingly disconnected from traditional structures of representative democracy. A recent government survey showed that only 38% of people in England and Wales felt they could influence decisions made for their local area.

Solution: raising participation

CLP enables people to discuss the needs and priorities of a locality on terms that are meaningful to them. When a community is the driving force for a CLP, participation rates are usually very high.

In many smaller communities, it is not uncommon for participation rates to exceed 70%. For example, the steering group of the Easton in Gordano Community Led Plan in North Somerset used a variety of consultation methods including a questionnaire and several public meetings to successfully engage with 76% of households in a Parish of approximately 2,900 people.

Community Led Plans should be undertaken in collaboration with a parish or town council, though it is important that the council allows the community itself to lead on their

development. The councils themselves benefit from supporting plans as they increase their legitimacy as an effective tier of local government and deliver renewed interest by local people in their work. An example of this is Headley in Surrey, where the production of a Community Led Plan resulted in new people standing for election and seats on the parish council were contested for the first time in 30 years.

Local authorities are increasingly recognising the potential of Community Led Planning for use in area-wide strategic planning. Databases have been developed in a number of areas including Devon and Essex County Councils. This has allowed specific actions arising from CLP to be assigned to relevant officers within the authority who are expected to support and monitor their progress as part of their everyday duties.

Issue: Inclusive communities

There is a risk that during economic recession, more people may become excluded from everyday activities. This in turn threatens any prospect of community cohesion.

Solution: tailored approaches

Community Led Plans rely on the whole community coming together and sharing knowledge and resources to improve the local area for everyone's benefit. If facilitated well, they provide an ideal opportunity for a range of needs and aspirations to be discussed and addressed, including those of individuals who may be excluded from existing activities or decision-making. Traditionally, Community Led Plans have been very effective at involving younger and older members of the community in debate about the needs of the local area. For example in Herrietsham, Kent, primary school children created a model of the village which was used by the rest of the local community to discuss issues of interest.

As a result of Dorchester's Town Plan, English lessons for foreign nationals working in local restaurants and takeaways were funded by the Local Chamber for Commerce and delivered by Dorset Community Action. The lessons have provided these people with greater confidence to communicate with other residents enabling them to participate more in community life.

Many rural communities express reluctance to see more housing in their local area. However, exploring such issues within a Community Led Plan can generate new understanding about the needs of those most affected by lack of affordability. It allows the issue to become 'real' when the impact is seen to be on neighbours and their children and succeeds in changing attitudes.

Issue: Greener communities

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 everyone and if not tackled now, it will affect future generations.

Solution: practical climate change initiatives

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. Guidance recently produced by West Midlands Rural Community Action Network on Greening Your Community Led Plan aims to address these issues and helps communities consider climate change when producing their plan.

A Community Led Plan in Hoveringham, Nottinghamshire, led to a community-based emergency plan that had added benefit for the community since it generated a local initiative to refurbish the community-owned village hall to include a temporary refuge for residents who have been flooded out.

In Ollerton with Marthall, Cheshire, the community used the evidence documented within their Community Led Plan to successfully bid for Big Lottery funding to develop a new 'eco' village hall. This will provide for an environmentally friendly, sustainable and economically viable facility serving the community well into the future. They hope to start the building work soon.

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

Rural Community Action Network (RCAN)

The RCAN 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 RCAN 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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