



Policy Position Paper: Healthcare

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 a reality.

ACRE's vision for healthcare in rural areas

ACRE believes that to improve health outcomes people need and deserve high quality healthcare services appropriate to their needs. Rural solutions to healthcare delivery should be developed to suit the rural context making full use of local facilities, outreach delivery and improved transport.

The provision of healthcare in rural areas presents a mixed picture with overall better standards of health for individuals but as might be expected, poorer access to services (GPs, hospitals and specialist centres).

Rural residents are both further from healthcare services and have greater problems of access because of centralisation of services and limited public transport. It costs more to deliver healthcare services for rural populations, either through outreach services or for individuals to access services via transport. The problems of access are even greater when specialist healthcare services are required (as they are more remote from communities). There is evidence that the health outcomes for rural patients requiring specialist services are poor compared to people in urban areas. For example, the further patients live from specialist cancer centres, the poorer their chances of survival.

Often people who are deprived have greater health needs but less capacity to obtain that care because of their deprivation causing greater problems of access. Even access to a GP three miles away is obviously a significant problem for a family with no car/public transport. These issues will become more prevalent with an ageing population and the increased demands this places on our healthcare system.

ACRE supports the highlighting and dissemination of good practice in the delivery of effective healthcare models in rural areas. We want to see the recognition of higher costs of delivery and the ageing rural population being reflected in a funding formula that enables innovations like tele-medicine, electronic support and ways that bring doctors and patients closer together when there may be a long geographical distance. By bringing these together you will create sustainable local services supported by people at a distance.

Over the years, members of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) have built up vast networks of contacts on the ground, giving them unique insights into particular health needs and gaps in service provision in rural areas. The holistic nature of their work means that they can link solutions across disciplines, for example, by holding surgeries in village halls and tailoring public transport to hospital locations and clinic times.

Issue: remote health services

The inaccessibility of essential health services creates significant problems for rural communities and reduced health outcomes for individuals.

Solution: Local brokerage and facilitation of health solutions

RCAN members are well placed with community insight to provide advice, information and support, helping meet the health needs of older people in rural communities.

Village Agents employed and managed by a number of RCAN members bridge the gap between the local community and those statutory and voluntary organisations able to offer help or support where required. They are facilitators in the provision of high quality information, promoting access to a wide range of services, carrying out a series of practical checks and identifying unmet need within their community. This can be highly effective in meeting a community's health needs. For example, in Gloucestershire a village agent's client was having a problem with their nebuliser, which wasn't working properly and was told she would have to travel to the hospital. As this was impossible in her situation, the Agent rang the nebuliser service department at the hospital and arranged for them to deliver the spare parts to the local Doctor's surgery the following day.

In Staffordshire, a mental health outreach project has been developed through a well-located village hall. The RCAN member worked with its County Mental Health Services and the local community to find a suitable location for the mental health outreach service so that it could provide healthcare for many neighbouring parishes. Codshall Village Hall was selected for its accessible location and was improved and extended with funding from the health authority. When not in use by the outreach service, there is the added benefit of the space being available for other activities, with income generated for the local community.

Issue: involving rural communities in healthcare decisions

It is essential to develop and maintain effective methods that reach out across rural areas to ensure that communities' views are represented in respect of their health services.

Solution: Effective participation

Local Involvement Networks (LINKs) were established nationally to involve the public in developing health and social care services, with every LINK 'tailor-made' for a county. LINK in Cornwall is hosted by the RCAN member and managed and regulated by the people, organisations and community groups that take part in it. Considerable time has been spent in gathering the views and concerns of people in Cornwall, particularly in isolated areas. These have been fed into statutory agencies - influencing their strategic planning in the way services are determined, designed and run.

Showing that simple solutions can work well, East Riding of Yorkshire Local Involvement Network hosted by the RCAN member from Humber & Wolds has had two notable achievements for rural communities. Firstly, the findings from a simple questionnaire resulted on improvement in access to GPs. Secondly, the issue of transport to hospital from rural areas was causing problems for patients and visitors. By bringing together a small action group in the Bridlington/Scarborough area it has been possible to identify areas for improvement and action.

Issue: the health needs of rural communities

Without establishing the health needs of a community it is not possible to deliver targeted services.

Solution: Establishing the health needs of rural communities

Working with the local PCT, the RCAN member from the Tees Valley undertook a rural health needs survey to determine the needs of the rural population in the area. This focussed on the delivery of health services including access to GPs and collection of prescriptions. The community identified key areas where services could be more accessible and this has provided a basis for the PCT to consider their approach to the delivery of services to the hard to reach rural parts of the community of Tees Valley.

Research funded by North Lancashire Primary Care Trust (PCT) and carried out by Community Futures, the RCAN member for the area, aimed to identify the current provision of healthcare delivery in the area, local accessibility and the availability of public transport. The researchers investigated how and where the local communities accessed their health care provision and if any potential changes in local healthcare delivery would improve service. Over 80% of respondents needed use of a car to access rural health services and 52% had to travel over five miles to access these services. These results will be used to plan future service provision.

Issue: the outbreak of an emergency health pandemic

There have been many serious health concerns that have arisen over the last few years, most recently, Swine Flu. Due to these serious implications, they require a planned response from national and local Government which involves all local delivery partners.

Solution: Local planned responses to national emergency

Local community led action can provide effective responses to potentially hazardous health occurrences.

The RCAN member in Oxfordshire has supported the parish of Chinnor to develop a Community Led Plan (see www.communityledplanning.com), which led to the village developing a contingency plan in case there should be a flu pandemic. Oxfordshire Rural Community Council organised a seminar to motivate and support local communities to develop a local contingency plan. The aim was to share good practice across the county, soften the impact of any potential emergency for the community and provide a systematic and orderly approach to dealing with any issues. This in turn will reduce the impact on all members of the community, especially the vulnerable.

This has led to the development of a template for a Village Wide Emergency Plan, with models for administering help and an information folder which can be used for any emergency. A predetermined list of procedures and responsibilities has been set up which identifies volunteers, resources and accommodation and ensures appropriate action is taken. This model is applicable across a diverse range of emergency situations and could be part of a future Communities Resilience Plan. Good practice has been shared nationally through the Rural Community Action Network and the project has received a great deal of media attention, motivating the community and increasing communication.

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

ACRE details

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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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