



Policy Position Paper: Older People

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 older people in rural areas

Older people are the backbone of rural communities through the contribution they make to the sustainability of local community life. ACRE believes that it is essential that older people have access to appropriate services and support to enable them to stay and remain active within their community.

The rural population is ageing far faster than in urban areas. In rural areas older people contribute to organising community activity and are often the main users of village facilities. However, as they become frailer, they begin to rely on such facilities and services, with support from family and friends to remain local, rather than move away to more supported accommodation. The Government is keen that older people remain within their own communities but with this comes the need to maintain access to services at affordable prices. However, public health and social care services, already stretched in rural areas, will increasingly come under financial constraint. Moreover, travelling to more centralised services is not an option for many older people, through either lack of access to their own transport or high costs.

Older people are the single largest group on low incomes in rural areas. Rural poverty and deprivation is often hidden because it is masked by surrounding affluence. For older people this is often compounded due to their reluctance to seek help and because of isolation from services, they lack information about their entitled benefits. They are further disadvantaged by the extra costs of accessing essential services and impacts of heating older, less fuel efficient homes. This means that the rising level of elderly people who find themselves financially excluded and the availability of local services are inextricably linked.

As people age they have fundamental life choices to make. However, in rural areas these choices can be highly restricted, as is the support and information available to them. Given the long history of their work within rural communities, members of the Rural Community Action Network have a strong understanding of the relationships between residents' needs and local service provision. Much of RCAN support for general community initiatives, such as village halls, community-owned shops and transport schemes, have proportionately higher benefit for the elderly people in the area who rely on them for day to day needs. However, older people also have specific needs and RCAN is involved in many local initiatives aimed at meeting these. Our support aims to enable older people to retain active and healthy lives as members of their community, supported by their own social networks.

Issue: Inaccessible services and information

In rural areas, mobility and access to services and information can become problematic for older people as their life begins to alter, social care needs arise and financial circumstances change. Social networks in the community may be strong, but older people may not wish to advertise their individual and personal needs within their own community. Making contact with external service providers is much more difficult when living long distances away from advice points and surgeries, especially for those who have lived independently for many years.

Solution: Rural access to services and information

Support infrastructure, tailored to the rural community context, can ensure better access to advice and services, particularly for those attempting to get help for the first time.

Gloucestershire Rural Community Council has developed a Village Agents Scheme which is now being replicated by RCAN members. Part time Village Agents are recruited to act across a cluster of communities, making themselves, and the service they can provide, known to people in the locality. Being locally recruited, locally-based, well trained and well networked, they are able to bridge the gap between the local community and those statutory and voluntary organisations able to offer help or support where required. Acting as facilitators they provide high quality information, promote access to a wide range of services, carry out a series of practical checks and identify unmet need within their community.

Signpost, a project run by the Community Council of Shropshire, is a gateway to a range of services designed to help people over the age of 65 remain in their own homes. When older people with a variety of needs come into contact with an agency, a form is completed and forwarded to Signpost which acts as a 'clearing house' and makes the appropriate referrals to other agencies. An online database is being developed that will allow partners to receive referrals and update information.

RCAN also provides a range of solutions to enable better transport access to services in local towns. For example, Humber & Wolds Rural Community Council runs a voluntary car service, targeted at older people and the disabled who either have no private or public transport available. It has enabled individuals to access essential services, improved social inclusion and increased opportunities for volunteer working.

Issue: The ageing population – problems of health and well-being

The rural population is ageing faster than in other parts of the country - a quarter of England's rural population is over 60. This brings with it specific health and social care needs. However, rural population are often distant from the services that they need, particularly if they have specialised needs.

Solution: Ensuring health services are shaped to older people's needs

Across the country there are examples of RCAN members working to improve support for older people often living in isolated and difficult circumstances.

LINKs or Local Involvement Networks are found in every county and several are hosted by RCAN members. In East Riding of Yorkshire, the Humber and Wolds Rural Community Council ensures that its LINK is inclusive, representative of the local community and works with the community, commissioners and providers of health and social care services. Local successes include reducing problems related to transport to hospital in rural areas. By bringing together a small action group in the Bridlington/Scarborough area, comprising the local Ambulance service, commissioners and providers and acute hospital provision, it has been possible to identify areas for improvement and action.

The Older People's Charter Monitoring Group, developed by the Humber & Wolds Rural Community Council, facilitates and supports the direct involvement of the public in strategic health and social care planning, commissioning and monitoring. It enhances the voluntary and community sector's capacity for strategic engagement with the statutory sector, and promotes partnership working and inclusivity between statutory agencies and the communities they serve. They have helped bring about the re-organisation of the Adult Services Teams and the introduction of Personal Budgets and improved local practices and access with respect to GPs surgeries.

Issue: Isolation and lack of support

Social isolation and lack of support leading to loneliness and depression can be an insidious feature for some older people living in rural areas. The increasing centralisation of services away from rural areas and reduced opportunity for social networking is a strong cause for this situation.

Solution: Local support services

Many older people do not have the necessary family support as they would have had in days gone by. Whilst they may be in relative good health, small issues which they have difficulty in resolving themselves can mount up, resulting in loss of confidence and depression. Consequently this reduces their ability to play as active a part as they would like in local society.

Suffolk ACRE's Good Neighbour Scheme and Rutland Community Spirit from (Leicestershire & Rutland) Rural Community Council both provide local support services as a way of tackling social exclusion and rural isolation, preventing need of referral to statutory agencies. The schemes are aimed at the elderly and vulnerable people. In the case of Suffolk's service this includes; befriending, providing lifts to medical appointments, minor domestic repairs and advocacy.

Key outcomes are that older and vulnerable people are able to remain living in their own homes as long as possible, reducing pressure on statutory services, improved health and well-being for users and helping to build more cohesive communities.

Gloucestershire Rural Community Council's In Touch project is committed to empowering older people within their own communities. It supports the development of social and health related activities that promote independence and wellbeing and enhance social inclusion. The project gives advice, assists in the delivery of intergenerational projects and runs activities promoting good health.

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

Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)

Somerford Court

Somerford Road

Cirencester

Gloucestershire

GL7 1TW

(tel) +44 (0)1285 653477

email acre@acre.org.uk

Company Limited by Guarantee 3336101

Registered Charity No. 1061568

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.

Published on 22th September 2009