



## **Policy Position Paper: Rural Community Buildings**

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.

Rural communities benefit from owning well-maintained, multi-purpose facilities that provide opportunities for local social activity, sports, arts and recreation, alongside providing access to services and civic participation. A key factor is the provision of well resourced advice, information and support that ensures volunteer management committees succeed in helping their rural communities to be vibrant, healthy and sustainable.

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Rural communities have traditionally owned and managed the assets in their communities, providing vital facilities, activities and services which would not otherwise be available. This could be the village hall held on a charitable trust or the recreation ground, play area and village green owned and managed by the parish council. More recently, communities have responded to local needs by setting up community owned shops, pubs and post office services; these are often co-located with existing village halls. Rural communities have huge potential for expanding their role in providing assets and facilities to meet current and future needs.

There are 9,000 village halls in England with a total asset value of more than £2.1 billion, representing the largest network of community-owned facilities in rural Britain. The term 'village hall' covers a range of rural buildings, including church halls and community centres, in which a variety of community activity takes place. The key to the continuing survival of Britain's village halls are the volunteer management committees who have to deal with an increasing burden of legislation yet, manage to keep their halls financially sustainable mostly by earning their own income and local fundraising.

Village halls often provide the only place to meet within a rural community, providing vital and diverse support to improve quality of life, particularly for those who are least able to travel to more distant centres of activity.

The Rural Community Action Network supports and encourages communities in establishing and managing community assets through:

- Providing quality information, advice and support needed to manage public assets
- Building relationships with parish councils and public service partners
- Research that provides detailed data and information on issues affecting halls

**Issue: Ensuring financial viability and sustainability**

The availability of grant funding from local authorities and government continues to diminish leaving a gap in funding, particularly for major capital projects such as extension, refurbishment and new-build.

**Solution: Taking a fresh look at the alternatives**

Comprehensive research carried out by ACRE (available November 2009) will demonstrate that there is a huge dependence on fundraising to maintain the viability of community halls. Nearly 80% of hall committees take part in some form of fundraising activity to boost their rental income. This enables them to carry out essential repairs, upgrades and maintenance and also to offer subsidised activities. Volunteers spend an average of 18.5 hours per week, at a notional £7 per hour donating time worth around £6,700 p.a. to the management of the hall.

Parish councils need to be more proactive in providing financial support for village halls. As the local statutory body they are required to take the lead on issues affecting the interests of the community which includes its assets. They can provide regular funding through the precept, as well as borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board which could support capital funding towards repairs or extensions.

The Rural Community Buildings Loan Fund provides assistance to hall committees as it can be used to fill temporary gaps in funding either for specific projects, particularly those that improve an existing service, or for urgent works to enable the building to continue to operate. In many cases the loan fund has played a significant role in the management of cash flow during large build or renovation projects.

Plaxtol Memorial Hall in Kent owned residential accommodation which was an integral part of the building but in a bad state of repair. The committee recognised that extra income could be produced from the accommodation, if it were rewired and refurbished, to support future sustainability of the hall. The committee applied to the loan fund as part of a package which included the Heritage Lottery, County, Borough and Parish Councils.

Cusop Village Hall, near Hay on Wye, needed a new village hall when their lease came to an end. In 2004 the committee received funding from Awards for All to carry out a feasibility study and they provided car parking for the local festival. Together, with a sum raised by the Parish Council through the precept, a grant from Herefordshire Council and a loan from the Rural Community Buildings Loan Fund, the community has a new hall. The committee continue to provide the car parking for the festival which provides a good annual income for the hall and are now able to offer space in their new building for weddings and large events such as flower festivals.

ACRE's participation in the national Collaboration Benefits programme seeks to demonstrate the value of joint working between institutions and organisations within an individual rural community using the parish partnership model. Information and data gathered from the participating projects once they are complete will contribute to RCAN's knowledge base.

### **Issue: Providing activities and services that respond to the needs of the local community**

With public services suffering from financial pressures, there is a need to find ways of providing essential services in rural areas. Village halls can be the focal point for developing solutions for delivery such as healthcare, retail (posts offices and community shops) and activities for children, young people and the elderly.

### **Solution: Innovation in rural public service delivery**

Staffordshire Accessible Mental Health Out Reach Services needed two outreach centres in the County. Codsall Village was selected because of its location and close proximity to other communities and upgraded with Department of Health funding of £50,000. When not in use by the Mental Health Services the new facilities are available for the village hall committee to hire out for other community activities.

**Rural Action Yorkshire** has recently developed a pilot project delivering an innovative solution that provides internet access to rural services through a village hall based facility in the Yorkshire Dales. Two Dales Live enabled people living in the remote villages of Swaledale and Arkengarthdale, to access their local community building and independently contact a range of service providers using the internet. No IT knowledge is assumed or needed as a touch screen allows users to connect to their chosen service provider; support is available if necessary. The system is located in five villages and has six service providers and enables confidential face to face interviews, document sharing, signatures and photographs are transferred via a broadband connection.

### **Issue: Good governance and support for volunteers**

Volunteers require up to date and accurate information, advice and support to operate community facilities legally and effectively. The committees take on responsibility for an asset worth, on average £500,000 and must comply with VAT regimes, building regulations, health and safety, licensing and child protection measures.

### **Solution: Raising the quality of RCAN support to community buildings**

RCAN provides local access to quality advice, information, training and advocacy for all hall management committees through a network of skilled advisers located in each RCAN member organisation and supported nationally by ACRE. Each adviser undertakes an **OCN accredited course, 'Managing your Community Building'**, that equips them with the basics needed to provide advice to halls. Hall management committees are encouraged to strive for best practise through **the Hallmark quality standards programme**. The programme is based on a peer review system with the assessments carried out by teams of volunteers.

Community First, Herefordshire and Worcestershire community buildings advice service created a village hall contacts' lists based on postcodes and set up bi-monthly 2-3 hour sessions in a village hall in the centre of each postcode area. These **'Postcode Surgeries'** reported an increase in attendance compared with centrally located events.

Over four years **Action in Rural Sussex** helped The Sandham Memorial Village Hall, Cold Walton sort out its constitutional and legal arrangements with the Parochial Church Council and the Charity Commission so that they could apply for grant aid to modernise the hall.

## **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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