



Policy Position Paper: Services

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 services in rural areas

Rural communities should be empowered to influence and even deliver services so that rural people have access to a range of fundamental services tailored to their needs. Re-localising services means less travel, reduced costs to local people who are in most need of the services and, in the longer term, delivers the potential to generate more sustainable rural communities.

Public agencies increasingly design services around the personal circumstances of their customers, but it is often a real challenge to ensure genuine reach into rural communities. Greater economies of scale and more flexible services are easier to achieve in larger towns and cities. The drive to reduce costs results inevitably in the continued withdrawal of services which in more urban areas are viewed by local people as essential to their everyday needs.

To access healthcare, job centres, secondary schools and post 16 education, rural people travel longer distances, spending a higher proportion of their income on transport. Smaller rural primary schools are under constant threat and their closure has significant impact on the community. Particularly where they house extended services, local activity and provide social interaction for parents, grandparents and other residents.

In the private sector, many rural shops, garages and pubs have already diversified. However, both short term impacts of the recession and longer term decrease in viability mean further loss of retail outlets that have traditionally been a cornerstone of village life. For those without their own transport, it can make the difference between being able to stay in their village and having to move to a town.

Some public service providers have improved rural access through better integration between agencies, mobile provision or use of new technologies. ACRE believes it is essential to foster dialogue between communities and service providers because local effort can often contribute to efficiency and effectiveness. Local communities can provide facilities, form good neighbour and community transport schemes and advice points to ensure the hard to reach in rural communities are not excluded because of where they live.

Through supporting new kinds of community entrepreneurship and dialogue with service providers, the Rural Community Action Network can help local emergence of, for instance, local community-owned shops and service hubs in community-owned premises. These initiatives build on the strengths of rural communities and help re-localise service provision. In this way, we can build the sustainable rural communities we need for the future.

Issue: responding to community needs

Communities need to plan ahead and anticipate those services which are at risk of withdrawal but crucial to local well-being. Communities often need support to be able to manage this and enter into dialogue with public and other service providers.

Solution: Creative planning and sustaining service delivery

RCAN members support communities to explore their own future through community led planning (see the dedicated website at www.communityledplanning.com). This provides opportunities for local people to engage in dialogue to identify needs, consider the role and viability of current services and prioritise action on those which may be most at risk. RCAN members are also involved in brokerage with public service providers and others to enable local solutions to be developed with local groups that are willing to contribute their own efforts to ensure future viability.

The Community Council of Staffordshire worked with its County Mental Health Services and the local community to find a suitable location for a mental health outreach service that would provide healthcare for many neighbouring parishes. Codshall Village Hall, a community-owned facility, was selected for its accessible location and received investment from the health authority for a necessary extension. When not in use by the outreach service, the space is available for other activities, generating income for the hall and greater opportunities for local social interaction.

The Exchange at Crosthwaite, Cumbria, developed by Action with Communities in Cumbria, is a shining example of effective community action in the face of the loss of rural services and is highly replicable as a model for community use nationally. The Exchange was set up just one year after the village shop and post office closed. It provides a new multi-purpose focal point for the village, providing a wide range of services based on what the community wanted. This included a café, local produce market, dry goods store, the sale of books, videos, DVDs and magazines and personal care services such as foot care and a manicurist.

Two Dales Live based in North Yorkshire is a pilot project by RCAN member, Rural Action Yorkshire that has enabled people living in remote villages in North Yorkshire, to contact a range of service providers using broadband. The service providers use innovative ways of delivery to people living in these sparsely populated and remote communities. It has reduced travel time, journeys, carbon emissions and saved costs for both users and providers of services.

Issue: retaining services in rural areas

It is difficult to retain services in rural areas because commercial providers are challenged by the higher costs of delivery and will be under pressure to withdrawal.

Solution: Guidance and support for the community

Retention of services requires communities to take control of their future by understanding the cost and value of local services provided within the community and considering options for alternative approaches to delivery. Guidance and support is essential to communities being able to achieve this.

Derbyshire Rural Community Council's, *Guidance to Increasing Access to Services*, is aimed at management committees of community-owned village halls and public buildings. It helps them explore and consider new ways of maintaining, restoring and/or introducing services and other activities for their local community. The guidance emphasises the need for an effective management committee to plan strategically and work to deliver a well designed and managed building with multi-purpose facilities. Such a strategic plan can enable the community to introduce new services and activities in a coherent, consistent and integrated way, and may enable committees to influence policies and practices at a local and regional level.

Gloucestershire Rural Community Council has developed a Toolkit to help retain and improve local services. The Toolkit has separate sections in the form of tips and case studies relevant for the community and for local businesses. It contains guidance relevant to local shops, transport, health services, affordable housing, postal services and banks and cash points, alongside information and support for learning, training and work.

Issue: supporting local entrepreneurs to deliver services

Village shops are often less profitable and their closure and that of pubs and other services can signal the loss of community vibrancy and social interaction, as well as loss of local provision of everyday essentials. Those that provide commercial services in rural areas have to meet the challenges of small scale provision without the benefit of significant capital finance or access to appropriate skills and capacity. The viability of small scale community initiatives that can replace them depends not just on community support, but on significant volunteer action from the local community. On the other hand, new community-based enterprise opportunities are emerging for harnessing land assets for microgeneration of energy and food production. These may have significant market potential, but will still require community support to be successful.

Solution: Tailored support for community initiatives and enterprise

Done well, local community enterprise and small scale commercial providers can provide multiple benefits for local people and access to local services that would otherwise disappear. RCAN members help generate local community support and volunteer effort through their long-standing connections with local community action. Emerging community initiatives are then offered specialist advice, so that they can thrive in a context of small rural communities where markets are limited and full scale social entrepreneurship may not have the potential for significant commercial growth.

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council employs a Village Shops Development Worker who provides a dedicated service to individual village and community shops and for communities that want to set up a community shop. The project provides advice on business development, store layout, environmental health and trading standards issues.

The Rural Retailers Intervention and Support Programme, led by Derbyshire Rural Community Council, helps rural communities threatened with the loss of the village shop due to poor trading conditions, a shop keeper's retirement or the Post Office Closure Programme. Key successes have been the retention of a cohort of shops still in business serving the rural community, better trained staff, improved business practice and a collaborative network amongst retailers in the Programme.

Showcased here are two examples of where new retail outlets have been successfully implemented, but they are simply exemplars of initiatives that are being taken across rural England. Shareshill Community Shop, Staffordshire, supported by the Community Council of Staffordshire, was a takeover of a commercial shop which is now run and owned by the community itself. The community provided funding from their own resources together with other investment from sources such as Rural Community Shops (The Plunkett Foundation) who frequently work in partnership with RCAN members on the ground.

Blockley Community Shop, Gloucestershire, is an initiative supported by Gloucestershire Rural Community Council. A not-for-profit enterprise, it is owned and run by villagers as a co-operative and after just a year's trading its turnover has reached almost £500,000. In 2007 the village - which had once boasted eight pubs and a high street with 20 shops - was becoming a retail desert. The old village stores and post office was closing and the delicatessen and wine bar converted into a family home. Now, the new shop and café, run by a full-time manager with a rota of 14 mainly part-time paid staff, is the lively heart of the village, catering for the local population of around 2,000.

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