

# Health, wealth and access

The ACRE Network rural manifesto  
for the 2015 General Election



# Rural Manifesto

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## A fair deal for rural communities



ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) is the national voice for the 38 rural community councils who make up the ACRE Network.

Through our work with communities, we have a deep understanding of how Government policy affects the everyday lives of the 20% of the population who live in the countryside.

This manifesto sets out our key rural challenges for the next Government, focusing on the themes of health, wealth and access — from the struggles older people face to get to health appointments to the urgent need for more affordable rural housing to keep our communities sustainable.

Our calls to action are based on the intelligence and insight we collect from our Network members, who reach more than 52,000 grassroots organisations in 11,000 rural communities.

We urge the next Government to rise to the rural challenge and deliver a fair deal for rural communities.

**Janice Banks**  
Chief Executive  
ACRE

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## The ageing population

The rural population is, on average, older and ageing faster than the urban population, with nearly a quarter of all older people live in rural areas. This is creating additional pressure on healthcare providers to deliver in rural areas where health services are further away and a lack of public transport is an issue.



## The ACRE Network calls for:

1

■ **An urgent review of the criteria for Non-Emergency Patient Transport to address the discrimination faced by rural residents.**

Changes to Non-Emergency Patient Transport criteria and lack of public transport are causing difficulties for people without their own vehicles and putting pressure on community transport schemes, which rely on volunteers.

2

■ **The Minimum Practice Income Guarantee for rural surgeries to be reinstated.**

The existence of many smaller GP practices in rural England is likely to be threatened by the recent withdrawal of the Minimum Practice Income Guarantee (MPIG), forcing rural residents into making longer journeys for healthcare.

## Key facts

In the next 20 years, the percentage of people **over 85** will double.



More than **350,000** (35%) of pensioner households in rural areas have no access to a car or van



Only 55% of rural households, compared with 97% of urban households, are within **8km** of a hospital

## Keeping people warm

Proportionally more rural households are in fuel poverty than the national average. The 'Low Income High Costs' definition of fuel poverty makes a clear link between the cost of heating a home and what is considered to be the poverty line. In rural areas, 36% of homes are off the mains gas grid and so rely on electricity, heating oil, LPG and solid fuel, which can be much more expensive.



## The ACRE Network calls for:

3

■ **A review of the rural delivery of the Energy Companies Obligation (ECO) energy efficiency programme.**

Government-backed measures to improve energy efficiency are failing rural families, many of whom live in difficult-to-treat homes or rely on heating oil or LPG, who do not qualify for replacement boilers through a Government cash-back scheme.

4

■ **A review of the advice and support available for communities who want to set up renewable energy schemes.**

Communities tell us they are confused by the complexities of many of the 'offers' available. Consistent messages, channelled through experts on the ground, would significantly help communities to choose the best route.

## Key facts

The number of homes in fuel poverty is set to increase from 2.28m in 2012, to **2.33m** in 2014



**36%** of rural households are off the mains gas grid, compared with 8% of urban



A third of rural households live in **pre-1930s** properties with solid walls, which makes them energy inefficient

## The rural economy

The rural economy is diverse and dynamic with a mix of large businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises. In order to increase opportunity for start-ups, sustain current employment rates and increase interest in social enterprise projects, investment in dedicated rural business support is required.



## The ACRE Network calls for:

5

- **The LEADER programme to benefit as many communities across rural England as possible.**

LEADER is a £135m investment in community-led regeneration in rural England. This funding must be enabled to impact on all rural communities in LEADER areas and the learning must help communities outside these areas, to develop solutions to challenges they face.

6

- **A fair share for rural areas of the funding available to LEPs.**

Small businesses are the backbone of the rural economy and should not be overlooked by the investment strategies of LEPs. The recognition by LEPs of the role that the rural businesses and communities can play is vital to ensure investment into rural areas is equitable.

## Key facts

The overall Rural Development Programme for England budget allocated to LEADER for 2014 to 2020 is **£138m**



By 2020, LEPs will have overseen a **£12.2bn** investment in growing the economy



Nearly one-fifth of England's rural households are classified as of **absolute low income**

## Affordable rural housing

Rural areas, where average annual earnings are just over £19k, can be some of the least affordable areas in which to live. Outside of London and the South East, the average cost of a house is £206k. With the lowest monthly rent for a three-bedroom house in England at £550, families trying to save for a mortgage while paying rent are under increased pressure.



## The ACRE Network calls for:

7

■ **Withdrawal of the ‘bedroom tax’ on properties in rural communities with a population of less than 3,000.**

A policy designed to reduce overall spending is having an unintended impact on some rural communities, forcing people out of their homes. There is clear evidence that the incoming Government should reassess the rural impact of the spare room subsidy.

8

■ **A commitment to provide a proportion of affordable housing on all rural developments.**

A strategic, nationwide approach to affordable rural housing does not appear to be a priority. Rural investment priorities should be linked directly to the delivery of homes of all tenures that enable people to live and work in their area.

## Key facts

Mean house prices in rural areas are

**11 times**  
the average salary



The ACRE Network has facilitated the development of  
**344**  
homes on exception sites in 2013/14



Between 2013/14, the average rural house price increased by  
**4.3%**

## Local services

Generally, people living in rural settlements have lower overall access to key services, such as health, transport, libraries, shops and leisure facilities, compared with people living in urban settlements. People are at risk of social exclusion where necessary services such as supermarkets and post offices are not easily accessible and face higher costs in travelling to them.



## The ACRE Network calls for:

9

■ **Investment in alternative broadband solutions for communities not covered by the national roll-out.**

Fast, reliable internet access is essential for homes throughout the country to benefit from online services, and for UK businesses to compete globally. The next Government should invest in community-focused solutions for our most isolated villages.

10

■ **Investment in more 'on the ground' support for rural communities to develop social enterprise solutions for the services they lack.**

Communities need advice to be able to plan ahead to replace services, such as cafes or cinemas, that are at risk of closure. Social enterprise creates jobs, boosting the economy.

## Key facts

**One third**

of adults in the UK are without access to broadband



More than

**30%**

of unemployed people don't have the computer skills to start a new job



Rural areas contribute

**£348bn**

each year directly to the English economy

## Transport

People in rural areas have to travel further and spend a greater percentage of their income on transport than their urban counterparts. Coupled with this, essential services are becoming more inaccessible because local outlets have closed due to loss of viability. Those without their own car find themselves at a considerable disadvantage in their working and day-to-day lives.



## The ACRE Network calls for:

11

■ **Investment in recruiting and training volunteers, especially younger drivers, for community-led transport schemes.**

Community transport schemes are under pressure due to increased running costs, difficulties in recruiting volunteers, a reduction in bus services, funding cuts and reduced support from local authorities.

12

■ **A review of concessionary bus travel in rural areas to balance the needs of users and providers.**

Rural areas have an older than average population, hence a higher number of bus pass holders. Some local councils do not reimburse the full equivalent fare to bus companies, so 'tight margins' are being further squeezed.

## Key facts

In 2008-12, rural villagers travelled **10,000** miles per year, compared with 6,200 for urban dwellers.



Transport accounts for the **highest** proportion of spend on service in a rural area



Less than **half** of rural households have access to a regular bus service (95% of urban households).