

Rural Communities at the Heart of Government Policy ACRE's General Election Asks 2017

ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) is the country's largest rural network. Together with our members we reach 52,000 grassroots organisations in 11,000 rural communities in England, and we work closely with UK partners. We help people who live and work in rural communities, and we have an impressive track record since the 1920s of supporting them with practical and cost effective solutions to tackle problems posed by distance from facilities. Our work over this period has contributed to the community cohesion seen in so many rural areas, and which we celebrate.

To help the future Government to enable England's rural communities to thrive, we set out below policy solutions to the current challenges facing those communities.

The central theme of our proposals is taking steps to free up the potential of rural communities, by building on the factors that strengthen their resilience.

Our experience shows that those things that connect rural and urban places are more important than the things that divide them. Nonetheless there remains a distinctive rural context, and one which represents a real challenge for people living in our communities.

Brexit and the Rural Economy:

The decision to leave the European Union provides new opportunities to develop a more resilient future post Brexit. In particular we urge the creation of a suite of Rural, Social and Economic Development measures based upon building growth in rural businesses as part of future industrial policy, with a new community-owned approach to very local investment in rural enterprise. This would replicate key EU funded investment programmes such as the LEADER programme, EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) and certain aspects of the ERDF (European Rural Development Fund), which have provided such capacity to grow rural businesses.

Key Fact: Our diverse rural economy currently accounts for just under 17% of national productivity. It has real potential to grow but needs new and nuanced approaches to do so.

ACRE believes that the following policy solutions will help to build sustainable rural communities throughout England:

1. Housing and Planning

- Invest in initiatives such as Rural Housing Enablers, Community Land Trusts and the Community Housing Fund that will help rural communities increase the supply of affordable housing.
- Encourage rural housing schemes which remain affordable and available to local people in perpetuity by maintaining protection from the Right to Buy.
- Support the development of Neighbourhood Plans that enable local communities to pro-actively engage in the planning process.

Key Fact: Only 1,020 affordable properties were built in England on rural exception sites in 2016, exposing a three-year low and highlighting the need for fresh ideas to solve the acute shortage of rural housing.

2. Community Buildings

- Continue the availability of capital grant and loan funding for improvement and rebuilding of community buildings to adapt to modern demands, for example the Big Lottery Fund, and LEADER funding.
- Reduce the fiscal burden on community buildings: particularly VAT, but also the Climate Change Levy, Insurance Premium Tax, and Non-Domestic Rates.

Key Fact: ACRE has identified approximately 10,000 rural community buildings in England acting as hubs offering opportunity for local service provision.

3. Health

- Deliver rural focused approaches to reduce the pressure on acute services, joining up health and social care services through initiatives that maximise the impact of primary care locally.
- Facilitate the provision of adult domiciliary care by local social enterprises which provide village level care.
- Support Village Agent and Good Neighbour schemes, as delivered by many ACRE Network members to address the health and social care challenges for isolated (mainly older) people and reduce the pressure on hard-pressed public services.

Key Fact: Since October 2014 there have been 415 enquiries from people with ideas for services local to them. Of these, 173 have gone on to set up a new service in their neighbourhood. The [Somerset Community Micro-enterprise Directory](#) features 230 Community Micro-providers. Collectively they are supporting 700 older people and provide 220 jobs to local people. Together they provide 3,600 hours of care or support a week.

4. Rural Services and Transport

- Maintain the current network of rural post offices, to ensure that residents are still able to access vital services effectively.
- Invest in community-led, community-owned solutions to service provision in rural areas where a service has been lost due to a closure or withdrawal.
- Further investment in community transport initiatives to address market failure and to enable rural dwellers to access employment and services; eg community bus schemes, car sharing, as well as 'Wheels to Work', an ACRE Network initiative which helps young people access training and work.

Key Facts: Between 2010 and 2016, more than 2,400 bus routes were reduced or withdrawn as a result of reduced local authority budgets.

Recent research by Citizens Advice, in their role as consumer watchdog for post office consumers shows that 60% of residents in rural areas view the post office as an 'extremely' or 'very important' service.

5. Schools and Childcare

- Encourage growth of, and community engagement with, smaller local schools to protect them from closure. Rural schools don't just provide education, they provide local employment; childcare which enables parents to work; and a focal point for community networking. They are integral to building social capital and community cohesion.
- Increase access to rural childcare, through the provision of appropriate finance and support for rural childcare providers and facilities.

Key Fact: In 2016, 20% of primaries (3,478) in England had fewer than 200 pupils, and 30% (5,037) had fewer than 300 pupils, and all these were financially at risk.

6. Broadband/Mobile Connectivity

- Roll out good broadband and mobile connectivity to reduce the impact of remoteness on rural businesses and pupils.
- Provide resources to local groups to develop their own community responses to poor broadband and mobile provision.
- Hold broadband and mobile providers to account through consistent use of regulation and licensing to ensure rural communities are connected, including the most difficult to reach, and that they do not 'cherry pick' only customers that can be served at lowest cost.
- Invest in a focused programme of online access and safety training behind the roll out of digital connectivity, to enable older and non-digitally savvy members of our rural communities to both compete economically and replace their dwindling access to services.

Key Fact: In 2013 just 25% of premises in small settlements, with a population of less than 2,000, had the option of superfast broadband. The commercial roll out of these networks has focused on urban centres where 88% of premises had the option.

7. Energy

- Provide further support for initiatives which tackle the higher heating costs for 'off mains gas' households, such as the ACRE Network bulk oil purchase schemes, and energy efficiency measures for vulnerable older people.
- Continue to challenge utility providers to provide rural energy users with a fair deal.

Key Fact: The cost of heating an 'off mains gas' household is between 50-100% higher.

8. Investing in the development of local capacity and 'Know How'

- Resource the development of local community solutions to the modern challenges and opportunities for providing public and private services, such as through a successor to the successful Village SOS programme.

Key Fact: Village SOS (2014 – 2017) was a Big Lottery Fund funded campaign which supported 455 communities in moving a project from "idea to plan" and "plan to action"; engaged over 1,400 people in rural community regeneration initiatives; and recruited over 200 community mentors at a cost of just £3,000 per initiative.

9. Harnessing the Potential of Unused or Surplus Assets in Rural Communities

- Build on the One Public Estate Programme through a dedicated rural strand. This would focus activities, alongside local government, on raising resources which can then be used more widely (than for just housing) to address market failure in rural areas.

Key Fact: According to Ofcom, since 2013 (the last period for which we have data) the Government's One Public Estate Programme has created 44,000 jobs, released land for 25,000 homes, raised £415 million in capital receipts from land and property sales, and cut running costs by £98 million.

10. Rural Evidence

- Provide support and resources for producing up-to-date Rural Evidence. ACRE believes that rural policy must be based upon well evidenced data about rural areas.

Key Fact: Since the Commission for Rural Communities closed in 2013 there has been no dedicated agency using Government funding to commission specific rural community research outside of the general research budget of Defra.

As we have done over the past 90 years, ACRE and the ACRE Network will continue to listen to those living in rural areas, support them to develop thriving communities, and champion their concerns at a national level with the Government and other national partners.

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Notes to editors:

- The ACRE Network is formed of ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) and its 38 Network members based at county level across England. Many of the ACRE Network members date back 90 years; ACRE was formed in 1987 to bring them under one umbrella. Today, the Network collectively reaches 52,000 grassroots organisations.
- In support of the ACRE General Election Asks 2017, there is a full report on all 10 policy areas available for download via the ACRE website.
- In order to represent the views of rural communities at a national level, ACRE is a member of the [Rural Coalition](#) and a partner of [Rural England CIC](#).