



Action
in rural **Sussex**

A Guide to Our Work



About us

Since 1931 AirS has worked to demonstrate there is a better way of doing things: community-led change across Sussex. Our aim is to help communities, landowners and their locally elected representatives achieve local ambitions for active, balanced and sustainable places in which to live and work.

- We support community-led change to build resilience in rural Sussex.
- We believe in the potential for local action to meet local needs and aspirations.
- We celebrate the benefits of community participation and decision making.

WHY OUR WORK IS NEEDED

There are modern pressures that both challenge and offer opportunities to rural communities. The headlines are a loss of services, an ageing population, low wages, cost of living, high houses prices, restrictive planning, environmental damage and climate change. The consequence is a skewed demographic, with peripheral disadvantage and a preference for needs to be addressed in urban centres rather than rural settlements.

At the same time, there is a popular interest in biodiversity and rural landscapes, increasing incidence of working from home or close to home, use of social media for community information sharing, acknowledgement of habitat loss and enthusiasm for local products, businesses with a sense of place and community enterprises.

These impacts are apparent across Sussex where the decline of 'balanced' rural settlements is concurrent with local authority contraction and uncertain funding. AirS's experiences highlight how centralised policies for rural communities are not enough. A total top-down approach lacks adaptation to reflect local circumstances leaving people feeling 'done to', resigned and imposed upon. This is the opposite of the sense of participation that we aim for.

AirS believes that an important part of overcoming resignation and disadvantage is the sense that there is the capacity for change. That together people and places can alter their environment for the better. We are looking for opportunities to better coordinate our work to develop significant change with our rural communities.



Our Vision

- Vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities across rural Sussex in which people can thrive

Our Mission

- To inspire and enable community-led change that transforms and strengthens rural communities

Our Aims

- 1 Create places where people can connect and thrive
- 2 Enable communities to improve their wellbeing and resilience
- 3 Champion the voices and futures of rural communities

Our Values

- Respect for people and places
- Belief in our purpose
- Love for land and nature
- Trust in community
- Commitment to collaboration



What we do

Our services enable a range of projects with rural communities. These can be categorised into two types: A. Contractual projects and B. Diversified programs.

A

(1) **The Hope Keith Trust**, in 2024 we won a bid to the HK Trust based on our experience of asset based community development. The objective is for the process of ABCD to improve the lives of an ageing community across three parishes.

(2) **The Lost Woods** team are working with underserved community groups and people with challenges around physical and mental health, and learning disabilities by connecting them to pockets of ancient woodland between Storrington and Lewes.

(4) **The Sussex Housing Hub** is an enabling team that provides technical advice and support to community-led affordable housing groups and projects.

(5) **The Rural Housing Enabling Service** links parish councils, community groups and landowners to specialist housing associations and local authorities.

B

(6) **The Village Halls & Community Buildings Advisory Service** supports the trustee and management committees of village halls or community buildings.

(7) **The Community Led Planning Service** works to produce parish plans, neighbourhood plans and Priority Statements. Thus work responds to the rural failures of devolved statutory planning to create local benefit.

Future Work

Looking forward we are improving and expanding access to our services and designing good coordination between them.

Our points of reference for future expansion of our services are the policies of the national representative body of the ACRE Network. Their momentum is targeted towards ‘a just transition to greener and fairer rural communities’. We have interpreted core ACRE themes to develop three strategic directions for AirS:

(1) Create places where people can connect and thrive:

To enable the national ambition to increase the supply of rural and community-led housing by being a key partner with every housing and planning authority in Sussex.

To extend the reach and impact of a fully-funded community buildings service.

To embed community-led work on nature recovery and stewardship of natural assets across our services to create vibrant healthy places.

To establish a new community-led planning practice which addresses local needs and aspirations and supports effective placemaking.



(2) Enable communities to improve their wellbeing and resilience:

To bring our community-led practice into projects across East and West Sussex that connect communities with local natural assets to support nature recovery and the wellbeing of people and place.

To be active across East and West Sussex in the delivery of community-led asset development which enhances resilience and wellbeing - especially for the underserved and older people.

(3) Champion the voices and futures of rural communities:

To continue to inform and amplify the voice of rural communities to key policy and decision makers.

To promote the benefits of sustainable rural communities to encourage wider public participation.

To work in partnership with local authorities, NHS providers and the private & voluntary sector to embed rural proofing into policy and practice.



AirS Finances

Sussex Rural Community Council is a private company limited by guarantee and registered in England and Wales, company number 02907172, incorporated under the companies Acts. The company is registered as a charity number 1035401. The company trades as Action in rural Sussex (AirS).

The charity is a member of ACRE (Action in Communities in Rural England), which works through 37 county based member organisations. ACRE works closely with DEFRA representing the member organisations on a national level. Through ACRE, DEFRA provides funding streams for all the network members.

The charity's income is generated from a mixture of funding streams, which include grant support from DEFRA through ACRE; local authority funds including six of the district councils of East and West Sussex; Lottery funded support of our long-term Lost Woods project and a suite of fee-paying services involving community led housing and planning as well as a subscription service to the Village Halls of East and West Sussex and a consultancy service for the management and administration of community buildings.

Rural Sussex

The County of Sussex is over 84 miles long with a coastline ranging from high chalk cliffs to low marshes and major towns.

One County historically, it has often been divided into East and West Sussex and remains so today for administration. The outstanding features of Sussex are the South Downs, now a National Park, and the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, both of which attract visitors and tourists and provide a very considerable and much needed contribution to the economy of the area.

Sussex is also place of two halves, socially and economically. The rural hinterland and its settlements are marked by their small scale which is challenging due to the need to travel to find work, to shop and to access services. In this lovely landscape, poverty, both economic and social, is often hidden by the appearance of considerable wealth. The pressure on housing in an era of rising prices has pushed many local people out of the market. Village shops and post offices struggle against online offers and the main supermarkets.

On the coastal strip between the larger towns there are large areas of lower quality retirement homes which hide older, poorer populations on moderate pension income. Together with more hidden rural poverty this makes a substantial portion of the 1.7 million inhabitants.



The urban population is generally well served by the charitable sector, and there is a good understanding of the pattern of poverty in the County. Ten years ago the Sussex Community Foundation commissioned a series of reports under the title 'Sussex Uncovered'. These aimed to research all the factors contributing to poverty, disadvantage and deprivation in the county's towns. In contrast, the sparser rural population does not compete well for attention by charities and philanthropy.

Villages now lack the complement of wholeness which was there in the past. Medical, dental, veterinary, library, nursery, post, broadband and energy availability are some of the features which are taken for granted in urban settings but are very sparse across rural parishes. There remains however a vibrant network of village halls and community centres with a burgeoning interest in community run shops, post offices and pubs. We in AirS aim to build on what is there, rather than lament what is missing.

1 Community Homes

AirS Appendix:

[CASE STUDY 1] Icklesham Parish Community Land Trust - Orchard Close



Breaking ground at Orchard Close, with project partners.



Geoff Foot presents the completed houses.



Cutting the ribbon!

This scheme of fifteen houses was the first Community Land Trust (CLT) scheme to be built in East Sussex. It comprises twelve homes for Social Rent and three for shared ownership. The land was purchased by the CLT from local residents and then leased to Hastoe Housing Association to develop and manage. Lettings are prioritised for people with a local connection to the Parish and the homes are owned by the trust for benefit of the community in perpetuity. Works were completed in August 2022 and built to a high standard of energy efficiency.

Sussex Community Housing Hub, the community led housing service within AirS, supported the project from the outset. Our work began with a presentation at the Icklesham Annual Parish Meeting and subsequent production of a Housing Needs Survey. Having supported the parish identify the number and nature of homes needed we conducted a site appraisal process and administered the formation of the CLT. These tasks led onto subsequent negotiations on all aspects of the project from land acquisition to the implementation of a Local Lettings Plan. Vital to the success of our community led housing projects are solid partnerships between local communities, parish councils, landowners, housing associations, local authorities, politicians and funders. AirS's role is to be the link organisation between these varied parties.

Geoff Foot, Chairman of Icklesham Parish Community Land Trust: "For many years Icklesham Parish Council has been concerned at the dearth of local affordable housing due to rising local house prices and the lack of affordable housing options. Younger families were having to leave the villages, or were having to live in unsuitable accommodation. Certainly for me this project brought home the scale of the problem with the lack of local affordable housing, both here and across the district.

Cllr Ruairí McCourt, Cabinet Member Housing at Rother District Council: "We are really keen to see more social and affordable housing across the district. Decent, secure housing – like these wonderful homes at Icklesham – not only boosts the health and wellbeing of their residents, but they also help to create sustainable communities for local people well into the future"

2 Community Assets

[CASE STUDY 2] Adastra Hall, Hassocks



Solar panel arrays on the roof combined with internal battery storage.



Refurbishment and signage.



Fundraising events at Adastra.

AirS Village and Community Hall Advisory Service has worked closely for the last 18 months with the forward thinking management committee of Adastra Hall in the fast growing village of Hassocks, West Sussex.

Between 2020 and 2027 the number of houses in the area is planned to increase by over 30%, bringing more residents, with increased and more diverse demand for community space.

Approximately 600 people a week currently use the hall and at least 25% of the community visit in a normal year, attending a huge range of activities. The committee works hard to keep costs low for local community groups, which provide a variety of benefits to their members including overcoming isolation amongst the elderly, health and fitness activities, and a warm space for part of the day without people having to heat their own homes.

The hall cannot meet the current demand for bookings, so the trustees are now fundraising to extend it, as well as undertaking various improvements, including increasing energy efficiency and reducing the hall's carbon footprint.

AirS supported a successful funding application to the DEFRA Platinum Jubilee Village Hall Improvement Fund for solar panels and batteries in 2023. As well as helping the financial sustainability of the hall, these improvements will demonstrate to the wider community and other community buildings the successful combination of solar panels and battery storage. The Chair of the management committee, Chris Hobbs, spoke at our 'Pathways to a Greener Hall' event during Village Halls Week in March 2024.

AirS also guided the Adastra through their successful loan application to the Rural Building Loan Fund to draw down funds in the event of their building project to extend the hall exceeding its budget. Several trustees have attended AirS training courses on village hall management, including the Chair of the committee.

3

Community Action

[CASE STUDY 3]

Lost Woods Conservation for All – Plumpton College Foundation students



Plumpton students learning conservation tools and techniques



The Lost Woods Programme is a partnership of Action in rural Sussex, Woodland Trust, Small Woods, and Sussex Wildlife Trust - part funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It will turn 'lost woods' into 'loved woods', by reconnecting communities with local woodlands for the benefit of people and wildlife.

Sussex, whilst often thought to be an area of affluence and privilege, has many residents that are disadvantaged through health, economic and social deprivation, or inequality. Reaching and engaging these underserved communities is at the heart of AirS role in the Lost Woods Programme. Over the 23/24 winter our Conservation for All project has worked with 15 students and their tutors from Plumpton College.

Our Lost Woods community development workers have created collaborations between the college, local conservation groups and woodland owners to provide the students with a variety of conservation activities that ranged from coppicing to path maintenance, bramble removal to the creation of leaky dams.

Simon McGill the course tutor stated:

"I have loved everything that the Lost Woods team have done for my students. The conservation tasks are the students' favourite part of the week. They enjoy being in the woods and often report that they feel better after spending time in nature. It certainly feels like it is a valuable contribution to their learning."

Michael Nailard, Hurst Woodland Flora and Fauna Group Chair, said: "The Plumpton College students worked very hard and achieved a lot. It has made such a difference to our progress at this site. These students were helpful and co-operative and really assisted us with our nature conservation task at this location."

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Community Action

[CASE STUDY 4]

Making it Happen – Warm Welcome Café, Uckfield



The Warm Welcome Cafe

The Making it Happen Project (MiH) is a five-year asset-based learning programme, funded by East Sussex County Council Public Health. The aim is to support communities grow their strengths, participate and collaborate to enhance people's health and wellbeing.

This is a neighbourhood focused project that covers areas in Eastbourne, Lewes, Hastings, Rother and Wealden districts and is delivered by five partner organisations, with AirS working in the Wealden District. The neighbourhoods supported are the towns of Crowborough, Hailsham, Polegate and Uckfield, with a range of individuals, groups and organisations mentored to develop new ideas and grow them in an asset-based way.

As the cost-of-living crisis developed in the autumn of 2022 volunteers in Uckfield pre-empted all government schemes by immediately responding with the idea of creating drop in places for residents to keep warm, have something hot to drink, and be with others. There were several schemes in a variety of venues emerging. Jo, the MiH community development worker for Uckfield, supported these with some getting 'small sparks' grants to get going. Scheme were then connecting together to form a network to co-ordinate resources and avoid duplication.

As winter moved into spring, most of these warm spaces closed. But the group at the Luxford Centre wanted to keep going and transformed into The Warm Welcome Café. Uckfield residents can pop in, have a cuppa, read the paper, chat, and play games. People have suggested new activities, shared skills and taught games, so more and more is happening. Everyone gets a warm welcome at this fantastic community group. Jo has been supporting the initiative throughout: helping them access further funding and offering help to the volunteers when needed.

One lady, who had recovered from a stroke, said that attending the Warm Welcome Café "brightens her day". A gentleman who had attended since the start of the warm space in November 2022, declared that "It's bl**dy marvellous"!