



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union



Under the auspices of
the Secretary General of
the Council of Europe,
Mr Thorbjørn Jagland



First Floor, Northway House West, The Forum, Cirencester, Gloucestershire GL7 2QY
T 01285 653 477 E acre@acre.org.uk www.acre.org.uk

ACRE's Report to the European Rural Parliament

Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) is the national association for the 38 charitable local development agencies who make up the ACRE network. ACRE's vision is to champion vibrant, sustainable, inclusive and diverse rural communities by working in partnership with our members. The Network employs approximately 1,000 staff with a variety of specialist skills, engages in 1,300 different partnerships including working with local authorities, reaches 40,000 grass roots contacts and organisations in the 11,000 rural communities across England.

1. How ACRE collects and gathers information

ACRE Network members have local knowledge across their respective 38 Counties and within villages and settlements in those Counties. Knowledge has been built up over many years as ACRE Network member organisations were first established in the 1920s and 30s. They support a wide range of services and activities such as community led planning, rural affordable housing, oil buying schemes and transport initiatives as well as a dedicated support service for village halls and similar rural community buildings. The work is carried out through the provision of

- training, workshops and conferences
- targeted community development work
- support for communities developing community led plans and housing initiatives
- online and face to face advice and information
- facilitation of hubs and fora

ACRE works across Government departments but in particular with Defra to ensure that the rural voice is heard. This is carried out through responding to Government consultation and Calls for Evidence as well as building relationships with Ministers and Civil Servants. Advocacy on behalf of rural communities is an important role for ACRE. It requires a detailed knowledge of rural issues and an understanding of the importance of other national organisations in making a good case. Working alongside such organisations as National Energy Action (NEA), Citizens Advice Bureau, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and Community Transport Association is valuable as it aids understanding of related issues. ACRE also has a place on a range of advisory and stakeholder groups such as [Rural Housing Advisory Group](#) convened by The Homes and Communities Agency, The Department for Communities and Local Government's Community Ownership Forum and the [Rural Coalition](#).

ACRE collects and collates information and intelligence from the Network for use at those meetings using a number of methods:

- Surveys that are required through the Network's Defra Agreement and providing [reports](#) that demonstrate the value of the information.
- Gathering informal intelligence through meetings, conversations, internal online

discussion, training and conferences. The Network held 339 conferences and training events for village hall management committee during the years which were attended by more than 4593 volunteers.

- [Research](#) and collation of information about specific areas of work such as village halls.
- Providing briefings for the Network to explain Government consultations and collecting views to provide [responses](#).

[ACRE's manifesto](#) produced in early 2015 set out the key messages from rural communities about their needs and aspirations for the future.

2. The Key Messages

ACRE's key messages are set out under three headings Health, Wealth and Access. We have provided information about each of the messages with examples of how the ACRE network has worked with rural communities to find solutions.

HEALTH

Health and wellbeing of an ageing population

Older people are an integral part of vibrant rural community life. They should be assured of ease of access to support and services that enable them to live full and active lives and remain in their community.

The number of older people living in rural areas is increasing faster than in urban areas; a quarter of England's rural population is over 60. This group are also the single largest group on low incomes in rural areas. In rural communities many older people contribute to community activity and can be the main users of facilities and services.

Rural poverty and deprivation is often hidden because it is masked by surrounding wealth. This is compounded by the further disadvantage of the extra costs of accessing appropriate essential health and social care services as well as the impact of heating older, less fuel efficient homes.

The Government has a policy of older people remaining in their own communities for as long as possible. Key to this is the availability and accessibility of services and facilities to the older generation at a price they can afford. Lack of provision can lead to isolation resulting in loneliness and depression for some older people.

How ACRE members are creating solutions in rural areas

Across England there are examples of ACRE network members working to improve support for older people often living in isolated and difficult circumstances.

Wiltshire member, Community First, supports the Wiltshire Link Schemes. There are 45 covering 98% of the County with volunteers helping people who struggle with everyday tasks such as getting to GP or hospital appointments, doing the shopping or tidying the garden. Link Schemes are entirely volunteer-run and based in local communities. Similarly Gloucestershire Rural Community Council developed a Village Agents Scheme which has since been replicated by a

number of other ACRE Network members. The Agents or co-ordinators act as facilitators providing information such as dealing with debt, promoting access to services and carrying out practical checks. Good Neighbour Schemes across the ACRE Network provide the same services but use volunteers instead of paid agents.

Key outcomes from schemes such as these that are that older and vulnerable people are able to remain living in their own homes as long as possible, reducing pressure on statutory services, improved health and well-being for users and helping to build more cohesive communities.

Affordable warmth

Affordable warmth is the ability to heat a home to an adequate level for household comfort and health without developing debt as a result. Cold homes impact on health and well being particularly for older people, for whom it is an important contributory factor for remaining in their own homes.

The lack of affordable warmth is known as fuel poverty. There are three main causes of fuel poverty: poor energy efficiency in the home, high energy prices and low household income.

In rural areas proportionally more households in rural areas are in fuel poverty than the national average. The number of homes in fuel poverty increased from 2.28m in 2012 to circa 2.33m in 2014.

How is rural fuel poverty different to urban fuel poverty?

- 1.** Rural homes are less energy efficient: a third of rural households are pre-1930's properties of solid wall construction which makes them very energy inefficient – 35% of household heat can be lost through un-insulated walls. Solid wall homes are more expensive to insulate than homes with cavity walls.
- 2.** Many rural homes face higher off mains gas fuel costs: 36% of rural households do not have mains gas and are reliant on fuels such as electric heating, heating oil, LPG and solid fuel (e.g. coal) to heat their homes which can be more expensive.
- 3.** Lower than average rural wages: there are significant pockets of poverty in rural areas where people are dependent on low average wages and basic pensions or seasonal employment.

How ACRE members are helping to create solutions in rural areas

ACRE Member organisations have worked with other organisations towards highlighting the benefits of switching energy supplier, but our evidence shows that people are still largely confused about what their fuel bills are telling them. In Cornwall, member Cornwall Rural Community Charity was active as part of the Big Energy Saving Network (BESN). NEA trained individuals as 'champions'. Champions provided advice, information, one to one advice as well as promoting the services offered through local radio stations.

Community First, ACRE's member in Herefordshire & Worcestershire, also provided on the ground advice for communities but in this case to help community groups develop renewable

energy solutions. Many months of work resulted in a successful community share issue to raise the investment to install a 25Kw solar PV array on the roof of [The Cube](#), a local community space.

Oil buying schemes

More than 20 members of the ACRE Network run community oil-buying schemes, purchasing more than seven million litres each year on behalf of customers. Scheme members pay a small annual fee for their orders to be placed by a local co-ordinator who buys in bulk, negotiating the best price per litre. As well as helping the environment by reducing the amount of traffic and fuel consumption by oil tankers, the schemes get communities working together and encourage volunteering.

WEALTH

The rural economy

The rural economy is diverse and dynamic with a mix of large businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises. However rural communities still face challenges in realising their potential often linked to the challenges of digital communication, unrealised investment from LEADER and lack of recognition by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) of the vital role that businesses and communities can play in rural areas. In 2013 there were nearly 486,000 registered rural businesses in England with a total turnover of some £369 billion. In England, LEPs are voluntary partnerships between local authorities and businesses set up in 2011 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to help determine local economic priorities and lead economic growth and job creation within the local area.

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. This business support can be provided at many levels from encouraging village hall management committees to consider their value to the community in terms of their economic as well as social value, supporting and mentoring community shops and pubs through the BIG Lottery Village SOS campaign to considering innovations that can stimulate the local economy and renewable energy projects that can sustain and protect the environment.

Equality in the provision of broadband is essential not just so that rural businesses have the necessary infrastructure and speeds to operate locally, nationally and globally but so that the whole community can benefit. People in rural communities need equal access to the internet so they can access services and avoid isolation.

How ACRE members are helping to create solutions in rural areas

Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK) has a strong jobs and growth focus to its work. During 2013/14 ACRK undertook work to create or sustain 216 jobs directly and a further 693 indirectly. It worked with 218 enterprises both for profit businesses and social enterprises, ranging from village shops to community-owned buildings.

The jobs and growth work of ACRK is focused on provision of guidance, training, technical support and networking opportunities and includes help to create appropriate governing structures for local enterprise as well as aid in finding investment. Some of this activity comes through operation of a European Social Fund Community Grants programme (subcontracted from another ACRE Network member, Surrey Community Action, and specific rural retailers support programme eco-financed principally by Kent County Council).

However, general community and enterprise development also supports a flexible range of entrepreneurship. One example is work undertaken with a wood processing enterprise called Growth Rings, based currently on Romney Marsh. Growth Rings has evolved into a Community Interest Company (CIC) with support from ACRK. It has since secured Job Centre Plus investment in order to underpin a new programme of activity with young people.

The community in New Mills, Derbyshire, owns the [Torrs Hydro](#), a micro hydroelectric scheme which uses the Rivers Sett and Goyt to produce clean, green electricity.

The local Cooperative Food Superstore buys all the power generated and any surplus is sold via the national grid.

The scheme cost around £330,000, with funding coming from a community share issue, which raised over £125,000, and grants of £165,000. The shareholders own the scheme (around 230) and are mostly local people and businesses, plus people from further afield who wish to support renewable energy schemes. The shareholders can receive interest on their shares, but the majority of the profits from the scheme will fund a community grants programme.

Annual general meetings, held in the Revival Church in New Mills, attract a high percentage of the shareholders keen to hear how the project has progressed over the last year.

Each year, the scheme holds a series of well-attended open afternoons over the summer and has commenced an educational programme with local schools. This pioneering scheme has generated nationwide interest and has put New Mills on the map.

Affordable Housing

An appropriate mix of good quality housing is essential if a community is to evolve in a sustainable manner. Enabling people to live in the community can invigorate local businesses and keep local schools open but most importantly it creates a lively and vibrant community that supports local facilities and services. Affordable housing plays a role in achieving this by providing financially accessible housing that is part of a balanced mix of market, private rented and affordable housing.

ACRE and the Network contributed to [The Rural Housing Policy Review](#): Affordable Housing a fair deal for rural communities released in February 2015 (The Review).

It sets out the specific difficulties faced by rural areas:

- competition from commuters, retirees and second home owners means on average rural house prices are 26% higher than in urban areas.
- local earnings are consistently lower in rural than urban areas, averaging £19,700 in rural districts compared with £26,900 for the major urban areas.
- there is much less housing association and council housing, not least because of higher levels of Right to Buy sales. 12% of rural housing stock is social housing compared with 19% in urban areas so housing affordability is a much greater problem.

[The Review](#) also proposed a set of solutions with recommendations for Government and other policy makers.

How ACRE members are helping to create solutions in rural areas

During 2013/14 the ACRE Network facilitated the development of 344 homes on exception sites. A rural exception site is an area of greenbelt land exempt from normal planning policy. Permission will be granted for limited development in exceptional circumstances where a clear need for housing has been proven. The properties built on this site will be affordable, and only available to those with a strong connection to the local area.

ACRE works with the national network of Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) who work in rural communities to generate new housing projects. RHEs support communities to undertake local needs assessments and are experts in the critical brokerage role between communities, landowners, developers and the local authority to bring forward sites for affordable housing. Often supporting delivery of Local Area Agreement targets on rural housing, RHEs then work with communities, planning and housing authorities, registered social landlords (RSLs) and landowners to design schemes that meet local needs.

Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC) played a vital role in enabling a small development by a housing society in Gretton, Gloucestershire. It came about after GRCC's RHE carried out a local needs housing survey, with the support of the parish council. The survey identified a critical need for more affordable homes in the village, a site was identified and GRCC was key in advising the community about the scheme.

ACCESS

Services

Generally people living in rural communities have lower overall access to key services, such as health, transport, libraries, shops and leisure facilities, compared with people living in urban areas. 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.

Fully accessible transport that take people out of communities to the required services would solve the problem but it would not create vibrant, sustainable communities.

Rural communities need access to facilities or a facility from which services can be delivered and people can meet together formally and informally. This may be the village hall, the Church, a community shop and post office, the local public house or even the school gates. Across rural England there are a wide range of single and multi-use facilities owned and managed by local people for local people. The ACRE Network provides a range of advice, information and support into rural communities to help them acquire, manage and develop facilities and services.

How ACRE members are helping to create solutions in rural areas

Community spirit is alive and well in Ashton Keynes in Wiltshire where the church, pub and village hall are run and managed by local people. The hall, built in the early 1900s, is the focal point for community activity providing rural cinema and a range of other social activities. The community shop, an Industrial and Providence Society managed by volunteers, moved into a newly added annexe to the hall in December 2011. The hall is also home to a doctors' surgery and the local pre-school. The committee is an active member of the Wiltshire Village Hall Association for which ACRE member Community First, Wiltshire & Swindon provides the secretariat.

Transport

Transport in rural areas is inextricably linked with most of the other issues affecting rural communities and it has never been more essential.

People in rural areas have to travel further and spend a greater percentage of their income on transport than their urban counterparts. Access to services and jobs in neighbouring towns is limited without appropriate forms of transport to the right place at the right time. Centralisation of health services and ongoing reductions in local bus services (less than 50% of rural households have access to a regular bus service compared with 95% of urban households) adds to the problem. People without their own transport particularly the young, elderly and those with mobility issues, who may also be least able to afford high costs of public transport, can become isolated or have to move out of their communities.

Supporting young people into training and employment

For the majority of young people starting work or reaching their local college or place of employment requires travelling significant distances from locations poorly served by public transport. In addition, transport costs especially for private vehicles are prohibitive especially when insurance costs are added.

Wheels to Work Schemes

Wheels to Work schemes provide affordable modes of transport (often mopeds) to enable young people to travel to work, college or training. It has been estimated that nationally schemes save the country more than £19 million of taxpayers' money per year.

There are over 50 Wheels to Work schemes across England, many of which are run by RCAN members. Schemes like Shropshire Wheels 2 Work delivered by The Community Council of Shropshire, SCooTS (the Community Development Agency for Hertfordshire) and Wiltshire

Wheels to Work (Community First, Wiltshire) provide bespoke transport solutions. Each project integrates their operational activity with external organisations such as JobcentrePlus, colleges of higher education and local employers.

Such schemes provide safety training for participants and appropriate safety equipment. Many use local garages to supply and maintain the vehicles, which helps support the local economy. Wheels to Work schemes have been instrumental in trialling new transport ideas such as electric mopeds, battery-power-assisted bicycles and enabling young disabled people to access work through provision of specialist driving tuition. Wiltshire Wheels to Work also integrates its work with the Community First credit union so beneficiaries can save and then later take out a loan to purchase their moped. The result is that they become entirely self-sufficient in meeting their own transport needs.

Creative community-based transport services

The ACRE Network provides a range of solutions to offer communities better access to services. However, it should be noted that community transport schemes are coming under pressure due to a number of factors, including increased running costs, difficulties in recruiting volunteers, a reduction in bus services, funding cuts and reduced support from local authorities.

Humber & Wolds Rural Community Council's Voluntary Car Service provides accessible transport for rural communities to travel to health and social care appointments for those with no suitable private or public transport options. The Service has enabled individuals to access essential services, improved social inclusion and increased opportunities for volunteer working.

Tees Valley Vehicle Brokerage Scheme from the Rural Community Council provides organised sharing of minibuses in the community. Many groups who own minibuses do not use them all the time meaning that often the vehicles stand idle. There are also many groups who would like to use a minibus occasionally, but do not want, or cannot afford, to own their own vehicle. The brokerage scheme puts these two groups in contact with each other to make better use of available vehicles. Brokerage is simply getting the maximum amount of usage, by as many people as possible, of the available local minibuses.

Surrey Community Action's Voluntary Car Schemes Adviser supports 86 existing schemes and helps develop new schemes. In 2013/14, the voluntary car schemes undertook 104,500 passenger journeys and supported 8,458 clients, with 85% of requests being health-related. There are between 3,000 and 4,000 volunteers working with these voluntary schemes in Surrey, with demand increasing by 10% in the past year.

The transport sector in England is diverse and there are many elements making policy changes and joined up thinking difficult. The Community Transport Association (CTA) leads and supports community transport; The Wheels to Work Association does similarly for wheels to work schemes. Government Departments for Defra and for Transport have an interest as does the Department for Work and Pensions, who support the Later Life Engagement Team. Age UK and ILC-UK released a report (June 2015), *The Future of Transport in an Ageing Society*, and making recommendations for the future of transport in rural areas.

ACRE's ask of the Government

Overall ACRE would like to ask Government for more on the ground expertise for rural communities to develop social enterprise solutions including renewable energy schemes. This would strengthen the growing networks of peer support groups that are providing mentoring to new groups by providing advice, information and support on demand.

ACRE has set out below three items under each heading which they wish our Government to consider in order to improve the health and wellbeing of England's rural communities.

Health

1. A review of the criteria for Non-Emergency Patient transport to address the discrimination faced by rural residents is needed. 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 (MPIG) for rural surgeries should be reinstated. Its withdrawal has threatened the existence of many smaller GP practices in rural England forcing rural residents into making longer journeys for healthcare.
3. A review should be carried out 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.

Wealth

1. ACRE is very concerned by the Government proposals to force housing associations against their will to sell their housing stock to tenants at heavily discounted prices. Under the current Right to Buy Scheme the stock of social housing has been depleted, and in some areas affordable housing has all but disappeared. ACRE Board member, Mark Schucksmith explains the situation clearly in [his blog](#) and the [Rural Housing Review](#) suggests solutions.
2. ACRE asks for a commitment to provide a proportion of affordable housing on all rural developments
3. ACRE has asked Government to withdraw the spare room subsidy on properties in rural communities with a population of less than 3,000. In high market areas the affordable rent is not affordable to people for whom the housing is intended. Residents often have to claim housing benefit to be able to pay the rent which is reduced if residents have spare bedrooms. There is a very limited supply of one bedroom homes so finding a smaller property is likely to mean having to move, possibly to a new area losing the support of family and friends and putting their job at risk.

Access

ACRE requests:

1. Investment in alternative broadband solutions for communities not covered by the national roll-out.
2. A review of concessionary bus travel in rural areas to balance the needs of users and providers.
3. Investment in recruiting and training volunteers, especially younger drivers, for community-led transport schemes.

ENDS

Deborah Clarke, ACRE
15 July 2015