



**10<sup>th</sup> March 2009**

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **Funding boost for local communities**

Defra (Department of Food and Rural Affairs) today announced funding of £300,000 to the National Association of Local Councils and Action with Communities in Rural England in recognition of the importance of local (parish and town) councils and community action in rural areas.

This investment, for a range of projects over the next two years, is aimed at supporting the empowerment agenda at the local level in rural areas, including:

- supporting and promoting the Quality Parishes Scheme and National Training Strategy to develop the capacity, capability and skills of local council clerks and councillors;
- facilitating the uptake of professional training by clerks to smaller sized local councils through a bursary fund;
- developing a quality standard for county associations of local councils to deliver improved effectiveness and improve joint working;
- undertaking a national survey of rural community-owned buildings to update information around facilities, use, management and sustainability;
- developing a guide and training resource pack for local councillors to support good employment;
- widening and strengthening participation in the national community led planning network, to take advantage of best practice and research from around the country;
- enhancing the pilot demonstration strand of the Capacity builders-funded Collaboration Benefits programme, to enable more local communities to participate in testing out the value of the parish partnership model of joint working.

This latest round of funding complements investment announced by the department of Communities and Local Government in November last year to promote the local council sector. It also strengthens links between rural community action and initiatives from both the Office of the Third Sector and Communities and Local Government on empowering communities to take a greater role in developing local facilities and services.

Huw Irranca-Davies MP, Rural Affairs Minister, Department of Food and Rural Affairs, said: "We all need to be able to influence the decisions affecting where we live. The role of the parish and town councils are critical in supporting rural communities. As the rural heart of government, I am pleased to announce this new programme of Defra funding to NALC and ACRE to help rural communities to make their decisions on the issues affecting them."

NALC's chairman, Councillor Michael Chater, responded that: "This latest injection of resources into national programmes to support local communities, democracy and empowerment is hugely welcome. As the smallest unit of electoral democracy, local councils play a vital and very effective role in putting power in the hands of local people, to make the key decisions that affect their communities. Defra have an enviable track record of supporting the first tier of local government and rural communities and we are delighted to have their support alongside that from Communities and Local Government."

Sue Shaw, chair of ACRE said: "This is very welcome recognition of the increasing need for parish and town councils and local volunteers and community groups to work together in providing services and benefit to local residents. This portfolio of projects will definitely help to make communities more effective and show how, given appropriate support, rural community organisations can lead the way in demonstrating how to achieve genuine empowerment".

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### **Editor's Notes:**

1. The [National Association of Local Councils \(NALC\)](#) is the national representative and support body for 8,500 local councils in England. There are over 80,000 local councillors in England serving electorates ranging from small rural communities to major cities, are all independently elected. Local councils have powers to raise their own funds through council tax and provide employment for over 25,000 staff, while their annual expenditure exceeds £500m. Over 15 million people live in communities served by local councils, around 30% of the population. More than 200 new local councils have been created in the last 10 years. Together, local councils can be identified as the nation's single most influential grouping of grassroots opinion-formers.

2. In November 2008 Communities and Local Government announced plans for over £750,000 to be allocated to the NALC to help communities create new local councils, particularly in urban areas including London, and to encourage both new and existing councils to work to meet the highest possible standards in service delivery

and community engagement. For more details see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1063051>

3. [Action with Communities in Rural England \(ACRE\)](#) is the national umbrella body of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), which operates at national, regional and local level to support grass roots community activity across the country [www.acre.org.uk](http://www.acre.org.uk). Through advocacy and specialist support, the 8 regional and 38 RCAN local member organisations empower rural communities to shape the future of their local area and manage local facilities and services.

4. RCAN members specialize in promoting and supporting the **Community Led Planning** approach to community engagement and involvement. CLP is the structured process where very local neighbourhoods take on the challenge of developing a vision for the future of their local area, linking their work with local, regional and statutory plans. ACRE's dedicated website [www.communityledplanning.com](http://www.communityledplanning.com) provides a resource for best practice and research on both statutory and third sector CLP activity from around the country.

5. ACRE delivers, through its RCAN members, the national support service for local groups that own and manage England's 8,900 **rural community buildings**. [http://www.acre.org.uk/communityassets\\_index.html](http://www.acre.org.uk/communityassets_index.html). Estimates show the total asset value of village halls across the country is around £2.1 billion and they are run by 80,000 volunteer committee members. Community owned facilities form essential infrastructure in rural areas, providing a base for community activity, social support and many crucial services.

6. Collaboration Benefits is the national partnership programme, funded by Capacitybuilders, which aims to promote and support collaborative activity in the third sector <http://www.bassac.org.uk/node/428/>. The **parish partnership model** of collaboration, developed under the ACRE strand of the programme, seeks to explore how improved joint working between local organizations within a rural community, such as the parish or town councils and groups that own community halls or recreational space, can maximize the benefit for their residents and achieve improved sustainability.