



## Rural Proofing Briefing, ACRE and the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) May 2009

### Thinking rural: thinking urban

Rural communities include a range of settlements and market towns of varying sizes and contexts. In developing any mainstream policies and programmes we need to accurately assess how relevant any proposals may be to the smallest of rural communities compared with large urban wards.

There are a number of challenges to be borne in mind when considering rural proofing, to ensure that policy and programmes are relevant in rural areas. An appreciation of these comes from a thorough understanding of the rural context – the ability to **‘think rural’**.

It is also very important that traditional rural proofers at local, regional and national level are equally proficient at **‘thinking urban’**. Unless the comparisons in the context can be made, it is difficult to see where separate policies or programmes might be appropriate to accommodate rural needs and where generic programmes can be successfully tweaked to serve both rural and urban contexts.

The Rural Community Action Network has compiled a summary of the major differences in the rural/urban community context to help those involved in rural proofing. However, it is often the combination of these factors that creates lack of rural ‘equity’. This is a parallel concept to the wide acceptance and understanding about the existence of urban concentrations of **multiple deprivation**, something which is largely absent in rural areas.

However, we should also recognise the **strengths of rural communities** and build on them rather than attempt automatically to roll out of urban-focused programmes. Many rural communities are shining examples of self-reliant, empowered communities, which are already demonstrating how to generate local action within a community, how to harness the use of community owned assets to benefit their communities and how to build on the role of local activists to benefit the whole community.

We therefore need to ensure that policy and programmes don’t inadvertently destroy the mechanisms on which that rural self-reliance relies and through which rural communities can thrive.

## Summary of the characteristics of rural communities

- The distinctiveness and dispersion of **rural social exclusion** and disadvantage, which underplays the significance and level of rural deprivation and where tightly targeted area based initiatives are largely inappropriate.
- Small communities; lack of **critical mass and economies of scale** for any local service or initiative
- Dispersion of rural populations and distance between communities as well as from centres of influence, resulting in **relative insularity and lack of connection**
- Lack of user **access to equitable facilities** and the higher cost in reaching them; higher cost of provision of equitable services and facilities, whether provided by the public, private or third sector. **Different priorities** for rural communities (affordable housing, community transport schemes)
- Different structures in neighbourhood governance via **parish and town councils**, and different **support infrastructure** provided to communities than is common in most urban areas (local members of RCAN, County Associations of Local Councils)
- The need for **'whole community' approaches**, which have been developed under separate rural programmes over many decades and which have delivered major advances in genuine community engagement. A typical example is the national movement on community led planning which can demonstrate how well it can stimulate and link both civic representation and local civil participation. But will it survive under more urban focused approaches to empowerment?
- Higher **reliance on voluntary and community activity** for the provision of what are considered public services in urban areas i.e. the generation of self-reliance as a response to market failure.
- Reliance on volunteer-led and **volunteer delivered initiatives** reduces the relevance of professionalisation of the third sector activity, for instance, through third sector workforce development. However, it increases the need for relevant local **sources of independent professional advice** for community organisations.
- Market failure in rural areas means **less public money for commissioning and tendering** for delivery in rural areas; there is therefore a higher reliance on **access to small grants** to support community-led service delivery.

# **The role of ACRE and the Rural Community Action Network**

ACRE is the national third sector body whose charitable purpose is to support sustainable rural community development through the work of the Rural Community Action Network. The network consists of 38 local member organisations, their 8 regional bodies and ACRE.

## **National coverage, local reach**

All RCAN members are charitable local development agencies, generally based at county level. Also known as Rural Community Councils (RCCs) they support and enable initiatives in rural communities throughout England. All our local members are well connected into local government arenas and with other local third sector bodies. Regionally, RCAN members have connections with many Regional Development Agencies, government offices and those who support regional initiatives on the role of empowerment and community action. Nationally, ACRE works with other rural stakeholders such as the Commission for Rural Communities but increasingly has connections with other more urban-based third sector infrastructure agencies, particularly through the Community Sector Coalition, which has enhanced ACRE's ability to 'think urban' as well as promotion of 'thinking rural'.

## **RCAN collectively:**

- employs approximately 1,000 staff with a variety of specialist skills, most located in our local members and directly working within individual communities
- engages in 1,300 different partnerships, including working with 58 different higher tier local authorities, mostly as a member of the Local Strategic Partnership
- has over 12,000 fee-paying members and
- reaches 40,000 grass roots contacts and organisations in the 11,000 rural communities across England.

Members of the Rural Community Action Network have a strong ethos of working with each other to provide comprehensive links across geographical areas and between grass roots activity and national advocacy.

## **The aims of the Rural Community Action Network are to:**

- Support community-led action and strong local governance.
- Increase the long-term sustainability of local community life.
- Influence policies and services, particularly to achieve equity for rural communities.

We do this with a passion for social inclusion, and high standards throughout the network.

## **The role of RCAN in rural advocacy**

In recognition of the expertise and coverage of the Rural Community Action Network, Defra has invested £10 million in a three year programme, administered by ACRE, to deliver strategic advocacy on behalf of rural communities at local, regional and national level.

ACRE is also recognised for its contribution to third sector policy through its strategic partner status with the Office of the Third Sector, with whom it has a five-year funded relationship, and its participation in many other government policy arenas requiring a rural third sector perspective.

For more information on RCAN's support for community led action, see links to:

The national Community Led Planning (CLP) website [www.communityledplanning.com](http://www.communityledplanning.com) This offers a national resource of best practice, research and information on genuine engagement with communities, including the support given for CLP by local authorities across the country. This site includes information on how the CLP approach allows local people to decide their own future, how local government can build on the energies of local residents to engage with local communities and the many benefits such an approach has for all those concerned with making community empowerment a reality.

The national Village Hall Information Service provides support for the 8,900 rural community owned halls in England through a network of expert advisors. Village halls provide a focus for activities that support and improve the quality of life for rural populations, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and those affected by the lack of efficient transport. For more information see the following page on the ACRE website.

[http://www.acre.org.uk/communityassets\\_villagehalls\\_informationservice.html](http://www.acre.org.uk/communityassets_villagehalls_informationservice.html)

### **Further information**

For more information and links to the variety of work of ACRE and RCAN members across the country, visit the ACRE website at [www.acre.org.uk](http://www.acre.org.uk)

Or contact

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