



CORPORATE PLAN 2011-14



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Supporting vibrant and sustainable rural communities
through the Rural Community Action Network

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PROFILE

ACRE is the national body of the independent charitable organisations within the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), whose shared aim is to promote, develop and support sustainable rural communities. ACRE was formed in 1986 and incorporated in 1997 as an independent national voice for the work of RCAN. ACRE's activities in development of national policy design of programmes ensure that the needs and potential of rural communities are recognised and supported and the challenges of delivery in rural areas are acknowledged and met.

England's 11,000 rural communities have a strong sense of community identity and a high level of self-reliance, with high rates of volunteering and ownership of local assets and facilities. In countering the isolation from centres of local government and public services, rural people have taken on the challenge of doing more for themselves by providing services, caring for their area and providing mutual support to help those less able to travel. Approximately 20% of rural residents experience disadvantage as a result of low incomes, inability to access services and higher costs of living, but the spread of social exclusion across most rural areas makes it far more difficult to address within public policy and programmes. The support structures that have been developed over many decades by organisations such as RCAN members help ensure continued vibrancy and sustainability of rural community action which contributes to quality of life for all.

RCAN members collectively employ around 1,000 staff throughout England and have a turnover that varies by county between £250,000 and £2.6 million per annum. The total national network annual turnover is more than £40 million. Most RCAN members administer local grant programmes, ranging from micro to large delegated grant schemes that are part of national or regional programmes.

ACRE's role

ACRE's national advocacy relies on understanding how best to connect rural needs and opportunities into arenas largely based around urban contexts and urban structures. Our national involvements spread across social, environmental and economic aspects of our work, creating multiple partnerships with statutory and civil society organisations. The practitioner networks established by ACRE enable us to connect with RCAN members to improve the flow and use of information between grass roots and national arenas. This includes providing national advocacy, information, materials, support, and advice. ACRE also enables RCAN members to demonstrate quality through managing a recognised quality standards scheme and providing expertise through participation in training events, some of which are accredited by the National Open College Network. Our business development function brings corporate skills and expertise to ACRE, including development support to RCAN members on an individual or collective basis.

ACRE has had a long history of involvement and joint working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) which invests in RCAN, through a funding agreement administered by ACRE, to help deliver the department's rural policy priorities and objectives. We also have a close relationship with areas within the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), particularly on developing the approaches to implementing Localism. Other government departments have significant impact on the health and well-being of rural communities and residents, and ACRE works with specific agendas and other national partners to ensure the rural relevance of policy and programmes.

ACRE provides the secretariat for the Rural Coalition, a cross sector grouping of significant national partners who together seek to deliver a more sustainable future for England's rural communities.

STRATEGIC GOALS

ACRE has a vision of vibrant, sustainable, inclusive and diverse rural communities. This vision is expressed in four aims:

ENVIRONMENTAL

To actively promote sustainable communities and, in conjunction with our members, encourage local action to address climate change, improve the physical environment and address the impacts of resource depletion

SOCIAL

To support and promote the contribution that RCAN and its grass roots membership can make to improving health and wellbeing, particularly for those most in need in rural communities

ECONOMIC

To foster an enterprise culture in our work, in the work of our members and in the support they provide to ensure thriving rural economies with access to employment and services

SERVICE

To be a national centre of expertise delivering evidence-based advocacy, through our members, to improve policy development and to secure RCAN sustainability

ACRE is motivated by social justice, self-determination, active participation and reflective practice to help achieve more sustainable communities. As a network, our purpose is to: support community-led action and strong local governance, increase the long term sustainability of local community life and 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.

ACRE's strategy is centred on three inter-related network outcomes (S1, S2 and S3) supported by two corporate outcomes (S4 and S5) as follows:

- S1 National influence
- S2 Setting the standard
- S3 Sustainability
- S4 Valuing and developing staff
- S5 Effective and efficient business processes

ACRE intends to achieve its outcomes during the life of this plan through specific work detailed in the annual business plans. This work will be delivered through nine service centres that encompass the totality of what we do as follows:

Strategic Outcome	Service Centre	Priorities
S1	SC1	National advocacy Develop and support ACRE's national advocacy with government and other policymakers Raise the profile of ACRE and RCAN activity and rural issues among external stakeholders, including media, political, parliamentary and third sector audiences Review and improve RCAN's approach to policy development and communication
S1	SC2	Research & evidence Develop and maintain a comprehensive evidence base relating to RCAN activity and best practice Improve systems for collating, analysing and disseminating intelligence, research and other evidence within RCAN Work with partners to conduct and share research and evidence

S1	SC3	Rural infrastructure	<p>Provide support to RCAN through information, advice, resource material, policy briefings and a platform for shared learning and training</p> <p>Develop and support networking between RCAN staff working on community buildings, community-led planning, access to services in rural areas, and the RCAN regional bodies</p> <p>Position and enable RCAN to respond to external challenges and opportunities</p>
S2	SC4	Network standards & training	<p>Review and develop the provision of quality standards within RCAN, including the peer review process</p> <p>Review and improve Performance Improvement resources</p> <p>Review, support and co-ordinate network training & development</p>
S1, S3, S5	SC5	Programme delivery	<p>Establish ACRE's approach to programme management, including delivery, monitoring and relationship management</p> <p>Develop and implement a corporate framework for reporting to funders, management, network members and other stakeholders</p> <p>Review and improve administration of grant programmes, policies and procedures</p>
S1, S3, S5	SC6	Business development	<p>Support the network through advice, sharing best practice, and facilitated learning</p> <p>Identify and develop market opportunities and business initiatives for ACRE and the network</p> <p>Develop and implement ACRE's own programme and project management and reporting framework</p>
S5	SC7	Corporate affairs & governance	<p>Review and refine the corporate governance structures, processes and functions</p> <p>Continue to review and improve information management and technology to embed effective knowledge transfer</p>
S4	SC8	Human resources	<p>Review policies and practices to ensure compliance with employment law and good practice</p> <p>Undertake a training needs analysis linked to an organisational training plan</p>
S3	SC9	Finance	<p>Achieve sustainable financial health</p> <p>Review and improve the financial management framework and reporting to trustees and managers to support good financial health</p> <p>Design and implement a robust and representative budget setting, management and reporting process</p>

MARKET ASSESSMENT

ACRE is the key rural community sector representative body at national level covering social, environmental and economic objectives. National government arenas that shape our work focus on localism and transferring responsibility from the state to community action. Enduring rural challenges inform specific work areas, such as a rapidly ageing population, lack of transport, young people's lack of access to jobs and training and the increasing costs of delivering services in rural areas. In addition, ACRE is responding to government initiatives on affordable rural housing, delivering rollout of superfast broadband and addressing climate change and energy generation.

Countering the effects of hidden social exclusion remains difficult in the light of national priorities on areas of high concentrations of deprivation and low social capital, particularly in times of reduced public spending.

ACRE has considered the key external factors affecting itself and the network. The key themes are summarised below:

POLITICAL

Changes in local government, and creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships

Priority for investment in areas of concentrated deprivation and low social capital

Localism and changes to the planning system

ECONOMIC

Effects of recession and reduced public spending, compounded by uneconomic rural service delivery

Changes to public sector focus and resource allocation

Changing nature of the rural economy

SOCIAL

Changing demography and ageing population in rural communities

Loss of public services and increased need to generate self-help solutions in rural communities

TECHNOLOGICAL

Use of new technology altering ways of working

The 'Digital Divide' in rural communities and impact on social exclusion

Costs of change, including equipment, training, information storage

LEGAL

Impact of changing legislation & regulation on operational costs

Definitions and restrictions in commissioning contracts

Costs of compliance with employment law

ENVIRONMENTAL

Compliance with and delivery of environmental policies

The development of a green economy

Community responses to climate change, emergency planning and sustainable land use

ACRE's organisational aim is both helped and hampered by the existence of separate government departments and agencies dedicated to rural issues. The abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities and the creation of the expanded Rural Policy Unit in Defra has streamlined the channels of communication on rural policy and strengthened joint working. Defra's investment in the Rural Community Action Network, combined with the demise of other channels of communication, provides a wider market for ACRE member's grass roots intelligence across government.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

The table below summarises ACRE's key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats together with how we will manage them over the period of this plan.

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <p>Our staff</p> <p>ACRE and more than 80% of RCAN members have achieved level 3 of The ACRE Quality Standard</p> <p>Information best practice and new initiatives through network activities and outcomes</p> <p>RCAN structure provides an independent route for grass roots intelligence to government and enables delivery of programmes that can achieve genuine reach</p>	<p>How we will build on these</p> <p>Ensure training & development are integrated through a training needs analysis, organisational training plan and annual appraisals</p> <p>Continuation of level 3 reviews and reassessments that now have Charity Commission endorsement</p> <p>Use the technology to provide information network-wide on strategic influencing and outcomes</p> <p>Continue to emphasise the value of the structure and independence to policymakers, funders and partners</p>
<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <p>Promoting national profile and maintaining cohesion across an independent network</p> <p>Capacity to respond to change</p>	<p>How we will address these</p> <p>Continuous review by the Board of ACRE's role and opportunities for network development</p> <p>Review the funding and resourcing strategy, constant review of priorities and develop improved policy guidance for our members</p>
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <p>Localism and greater involvement in the work of communities in partnership with others</p> <p>Benefits arising from the RCAN Defra agreement</p> <p>Climate change, renewable energy and new technology agendas</p>	<p>How we will exploit these</p> <p>Look carefully to new opportunities in related areas with focus on synergy with ACRE's and the network's objectives</p> <p>Maximise the use of information for research, advocacy, network capacity and business and network development</p> <p>Explore the potential for rural issues to link with and activities to play a greater part in delivering this agenda</p>
<p>THREATS</p> <p>Sustainability of the network</p> <p>Loss of public sector investments</p> <p>Direction of government funding and its impact on associated structures</p>	<p>How we will manage these</p> <p>ACRE will look to maintain its specialist community support focus, including consideration of different types of membership</p> <p>Continue to emphasise the importance of an independent delivery network to partners and funders</p> <p>Consider impact of user-led finance on the network and ways of working required to enable a response to changes ahead</p>

The impact and management of the factors outlined above will be evidenced in ACRE's annual business plan and risk management framework.

FINANCE

ACRE's financial performance for the past three years may be summarised as follows:

INCOME			
	2009	2010	2011
	£000	£000	£000
<i>Generated Funds</i>			
Voluntary income	51	41	40
Activities for generated funds	10	18	28
Investment income	11	-	-
<i>Charitable Activities</i>			
National advocacy	158	156	158
Network & community support	1,149	1,160	1,184
Standards & business development	3,512	3,506	3,531
Other	8	5	-
	4,899	4,886	4,941

EXPENDITURE			
	2009	2010	2011
	£000	£000	£000
Cost of generating funds	5	12	9
Cost of charitable activities	4,665	4,785	4,695
Governance costs	69	66	43
	4,739	4,863	4,747
Net movement of funds	160	23	194

Members of the management team are involved directly in budget-setting, management and reporting and the development of these processes over the next three years. All staff are briefed on the financial position of the organisation, and involved in development of policies and procedures.

The summarised financial information above shows the income raised for our activities, the cost of raising the income and the amounts spent on charitable activities. Information has been taken from the full financial statements for 2010, which were approved by the Trustees on 15th July 2010, and from estimates for the year to 31st March 2011. In order to gain a full understanding of the financial affairs of the charity, the full audited financial statements, Trustees' Annual Report and auditors' report, which are available on the Charity Commission website, should be consulted. Copies may be obtained from ACRE if required. [Signed on behalf of the Trustees by the Director of Operations]

RISKS

The Board of ACRE has overall strategic responsibility for risk management. The trustees of ACRE have identified some key risks to the delivery of this corporate plan which include risks on:

Strategic funding relationships

Changes in relationships, performance and viability across the network

Sustainability of income

Impact of government policy initiatives on supporting a rural perspective

Governance failures linked to RCAN agreement

Effective financial monitoring and business development

Succession planning for the Board and management team

Impact of changes in local government structures and funding

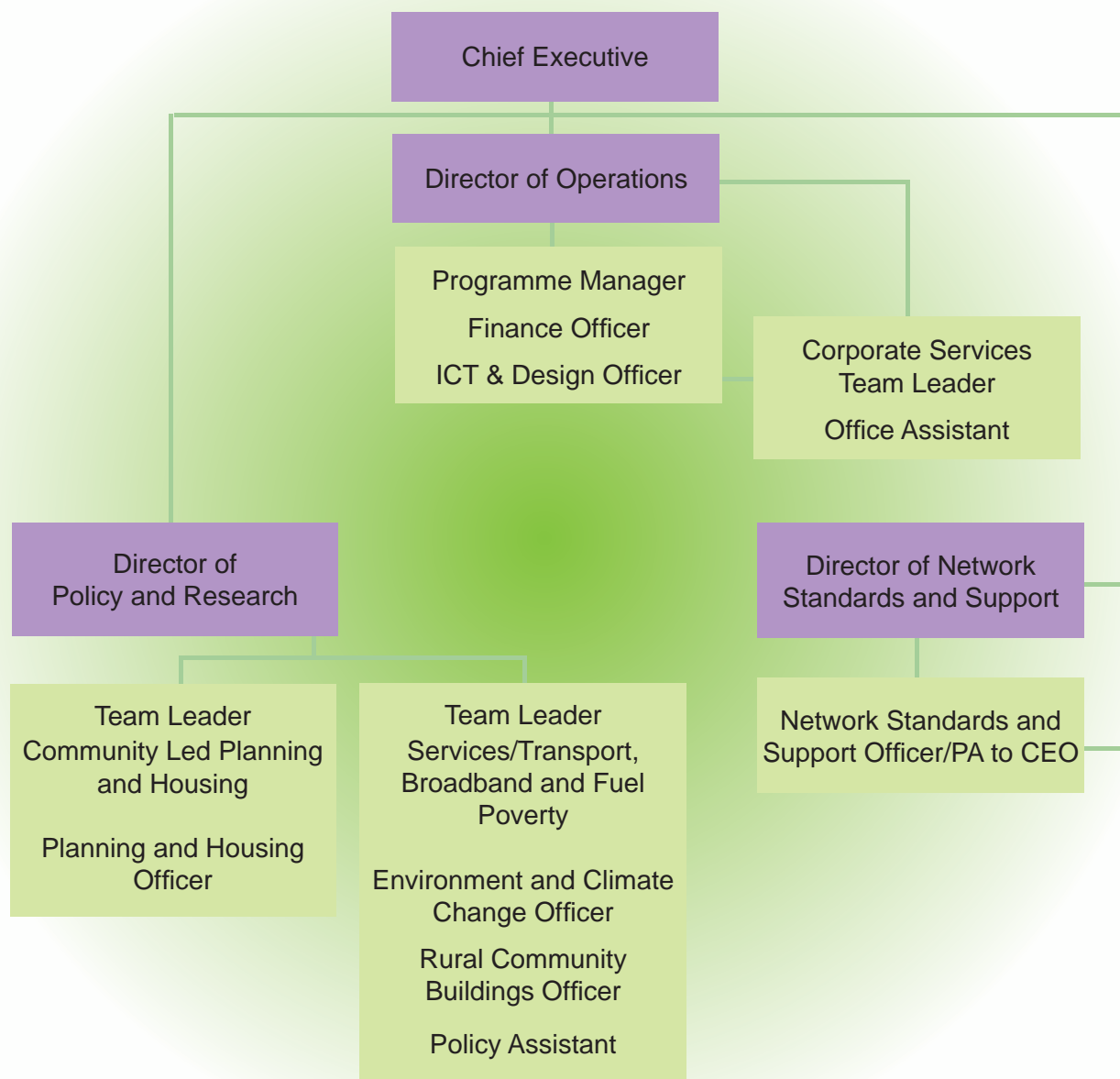
The Board have identified actions and lead responsibilities to manage these risks appropriately. The Board has processes in place to consider risk at each meeting, and in addition receives a report on risk management at least annually. During the life of this plan, further work will be undertaken to develop a more integrated risk management strategy and monitoring plan as part of our governance review and improvements to business processes.

HUMAN RESOURCES

Staff are the most important asset in our business and we look to maximise their potential in a number of ways, including training, career development and appropriate rewards. In return we expect a commitment to the organisation and its policies in terms of a positive contribution to helping it meet its aims and objectives and continued professionalism in the way we work and communicate with others. ACRE will be developing a new HR Strategy during the life of this plan to reflect this mutual commitment.

A summary of the staff numbers (by Full Time Equivalent FTE) and costs is as follows:

Year end	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Staff Nos (FTE)	10.8	13.9	14.1	15.4	14.4
Costs £000	358	439	496	523	537
Average cost £k per FTE	33	32	35	34	37



GOVERNANCE

ACRE is a charity and a Company Limited by Guarantee and accountable to its founder members (the RCCs) through its governance structure. Membership consists of 37 RCCs who pay a fee and are accorded full voting rights and a number of associate members, including regional RCAN bodies, who are not required to pay a fee but who are not granted voting rights.

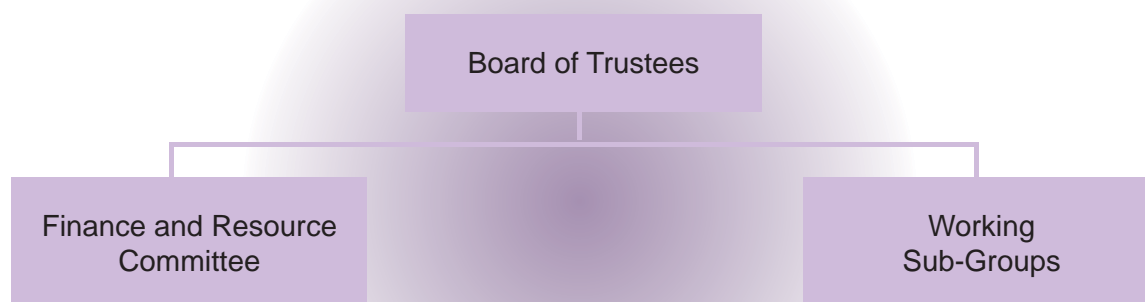
The ACRE Board comprises a Chair and Treasurer and other trustees to a maximum complement of 16. Eight trustees are elected by regional groupings of RCCs, and up to six additional trustees can be co-opted by the Board if needed. The Board has one committee: the Finance & Resources Committee.

Trustees continue to consider how we measure and demonstrate our public benefit with wider reference to RCAN, including for example the impact of influencing local, regional and national decision-making; sustainability linked to managing community assets; the impact of more effective and better quality services and skills development of RCAN members.

ACRE strives to be an equal opportunities organisation, welcomes diversity and does not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, ethnicity, national origin, gender, disability, sexual orientation or identity, marital status, HIV or AIDS status, home responsibility, age, political or religious belief. We will seek to prevent unfavourable treatment, directly or indirectly, to any of these groups in our employment practice, governance structure and service delivery. In the composition of our workforce and Board, ACRE seeks to achieve the broadest representation of the community in which we work and society as a whole.

ACRE's investment in information management and technology has focussed on putting the essential infrastructure "building blocks" in place and developing better inter/intra net facilities, online presence, HR and finance systems, contacts database and use of e-groups. Development of an Information Management & Technology Strategy is a priority for the period covered by this plan.

ACRE attaches great importance to the ways in which it communicates with its members and stakeholders. Our strategy will remain under review as we improve the methods we use to achieve better communication.





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