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**Community Planning  
Actions within Communities in Rural England ACRE**

Community planning is more than just bricks and mortar – it's about bringing a community together to take control of its own future. Long before the term 'localism' was adopted by government, rural communities were taking control and deciding on what was best for them. Community-Led Planning has always been at the heart of rural communities; whether it's a Parish Plan, Community or Village Design Statement or a Neighbourhood Plan.

The ACRE Network has continued to adapt and provide support and resources to communities to ensure they can produce high-quality plans. ACRE has promoted self determination, via community plans, for rural communities since its inception. ACRE and its members have pioneered the approach of Community-Led Planning with an innovative toolkit and, more importantly, direct engagement with communities. ACRE Network members employ practitioners who live and work amongst rural communities and have always been best placed to help and support the development of a community plan in any form.

The Localism Act 2011 introduced new powers for people to make neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood planning orders, with reduced interference from central government. These new powers are in addition to existing opportunities for community involvement, which are already part of the planning system. With the recent arrival of Neighbourhood Plans (NPs) and the localism agenda, ACRE members have been at the forefront of developing services and toolkits. By adapting their longstanding experience of community planning they are able to support rural communities undertaking an NP.

ACRE welcomes the addition of NP as a spatial planning tool for communities, however, we believe that NP should be simplified and encouraged to be seen as part of a wider, more inclusive, approach to community planning. Providing funding just for NPs undermines the ambition of many communities to engage with the plan-making process. Ensuring rural issues and needs are considered in the local authority planning process and in the Local Enterprise Partnerships economic strategies has been a key area of work for ACRE Network members.

ACRE was part of the advisory group that developed the Local Level Rural Proofing Toolkit for local authorities. This goes some way to informing them of rural issues and how to adapt policy to ensure

rural communities are not disadvantaged. However, it is still vital that rural communities have a voice in the process of local planning and investment priorities. ACRE Network members, who fully understand the context of how policies will impact in rural areas, are still the best resource for rural proofing.

Many cuts to services and facilities in rural areas are still to be realised and communities need to be able to develop their own solutions to these problems or be left without crucial services. ACRE believes that more investment is required for 'on the ground' support services, with long-term funding that cover a wide range of issues, e.g. health, transport, planning and housing.

### **Issue 1: There is confusion amongst communities as to which planning process they should follow**

With funding available only to support NP, many communities are confused as to whether this is the right process to follow, especially with the associated costs of the referendum and planning advice.

Solution: More investment in a broader range of support services for community planning ACRE Network member Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK) has worked with many rural communities to help them decide what plan is most appropriate for their needs. A key role for them is the 'demystifying' of Neighbourhood Planning — when and how it should be used. For example, in Manston, there was an old Parish Plan in existence which the community decided needed reviewing.

The community then needed to decide whether a Neighbourhood Plan (NP) was worth consideration. Taking advice from the ACRK rural officer, the community decided a Community-Led Plan (CLP) was required rather than an NP, as this better met their needs and addressed the wider issues relevant to the community, such as service provision. CLP also incorporates assessing what assets are important to the community and getting these registered with the local authority.

When working with Harrietsham parish, however, the community, which already had a very good Community-Led Plan, was presented with the local planning authority allocating a few hundred houses adjacent to the village. It was then decided, once advice from ACRK had been requested, to develop an NP that would seek to control the housing within the boundary of the Parish and serve the needs of the current population before the expansion of housing took place.

Also, as a consequence of producing a good CLP, Harrietsham secured more than £200,000 worth of investment in making the village an even better place to live; including £8,000 from the Big Lottery Fund for their Youth Music and creative arts initiative. The community leaders in Harrietsham said: "Most of Harrietsham's successful projects have a link to ACRK."

The comprehensive ACRE CLP toolkit provides the guidance and overview of engagement techniques that give confidence to communities to know what and when to ask for in terms of advice.

## **Issue 2: Local Authority Plans and LEP strategies must take into consideration the needs of rural people**

Representation of rural challenges and solutions in local authorities and on LEP Boards can be challenging — the local planning processes need to be responsive and inclusive of the needs of rural people.

Solution: Representation via community planning of rural issues enables an inclusive and positive outcome Shropshire Rural Community Council (SRCC) From May 2013-April 2014, SRCC supported Newport Town Plan group to carry out a Community-Led Plan in Newport, Telford & Wrekin.

SRCC's involvement included: Helping the group to plan their consultation exercises; helping the group to prepare a questionnaire; carrying out interactive pod voting in local secondary schools; inputting 1,400 survey responses into specialist survey software and analysing and reporting on the results; supporting the group to use the data to plan actions.

The exercise had a number of successes. There had been ongoing issues with three separate potential supermarket developments in the town so the data collected from 1,403 residents (26% of the population) was used by the Town Council to steer its decisions regarding the developments.

For town councillors on the town plan group, there was an expectation of widespread rejection of any further housing development in the town. Much of their contact with residents had been in regard to objections to planning applications. However, the responses from the survey indicated a general consensus that small scale development, particularly involving infill and brownfield sites would be supported by local people. An unexpected outcome emerged from the consultation. Questions regarding the environment and sustainability prompted unprecedented levels of feedback about the closure of a local recycling centre. The closure had meant people were travelling long distances to recycle or no longer recycling at all.

Shropshire RCC had never seen quite such a consensus towards an issue in all the time it has been supporting CLP activities. Yet without the consultation exercise, little would have been known about the level of public dissatisfaction with local recycling facilities, as few people had been vocal about it to date.

## **Issue 3: Too much focus on Neighbourhood Planning rather than the wider issues of rural communities**

Support beyond NPs is required if rural communities are to be able to realise their potential and develop holistic plans that are inclusive and go beyond spatial planning

Solution: Investment in support services for grassroots planning groups to develop their own community plans. ACRE Network member Northamptonshire ACRE (NACRE) is supporting a number of Parishes that are working on Community-Led Plans which will lead to either a Parish Plan or a Village Design Statement. This is an important time for the communities as the local planning



authority is finalising their Local Plan and have asked the Parishes to feed into the process on the back of the their CLPs. Neighbourhood Planning was not deemed an appropriate route for these communities in this instance.

NACRE has carried out three 'introductions to CLP' for Parishes that are thinking about producing a parish plan and are now actively supporting two of them. The other Parish has decided to take the Village Design Statement approach and NACRE is supporting them by 'brokering' meetings between the community and their local planning department and by support at a community planning event day.

Understanding the demography of a community is vital to the process of producing a CLP or an NP. ACRE provides the most comprehensive community profile report available and several of the Parishes NACRE works with were happy to purchase a copy.

Neighbourhood Planning is being undertaken by nine communities across the county of Northamptonshire. NACRE has been involved in the early stages of one and continues to be requested to provide advice and guidance as the planning process progresses. The other NPs in the county have not requested further advice and are considering their options.

*This article has previously been released as a Policy Position Paper on the website of ARCE.<sup>1</sup>*

**ACRE** (Action with Communities in Rural England) is the national body for the 38 rural community councils who make up the ACRE Network<sup>2</sup>.

**Further Information:** [www.acre.org.uk](http://www.acre.org.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.acre.org.uk/rural-issues/community-planning>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.acre.org.uk/in-your-area/network-members/>