



Policy Position Paper

Digital Inclusion

ACRE would like rural communities to benefit from equitable access to excellent digital services. It is important that the current bias towards urban areas is narrowed and eliminated quickly, so that rural areas can experience the wide range of benefits that services via digital bring to people and business. Support should be made available to those communities who wish to develop their own cost effective broadband solutions.

This position paper focuses on access to broadband whilst recognising that poor mobile phone reception also presents challenges for rural communities. Broadband is now an essential part of life for all communities. Lack of access to broadband leads to increased social disadvantage and is exacerbated due to the decline of and remoteness from local services in rural communities.

Although many rural communities have benefitted from broadband, overall they have fallen well short of advantages for most urban populations and the situation in rural areas is noticeably inequitable. High speed broadband can improve access to services, quality of life, and business viability – one third of Britons working from home now live in rural areas. Most urban communities take for granted Internet banking, downloading music, eBay and BBC iPlayer; benefits that we would like to see everywhere.

In rural areas there are many 'not spots'- areas unable to receive any broadband, while on average speeds are 15% slower than urban areas. Whilst many rural areas struggle to get beyond dial-up technology, Next Generation Access (NGA) is being rolled out in many urban areas. Delivery with an urban focus

has predominated due to the relative ease of installation of the infrastructure and the density of the customer base. With market forces currently dictating the extent of broadband delivery, we see failure of the market with regard to delivery in rural areas. With many service providers like local authorities focusing on what they can provide by digital means, stark choices may have to be made by rural residents, either tolerate an inadequate and inequitable service or if they are able, move to areas with appropriate provision.

To help address this situation ACRE is a member of 'Final Third First' which is lobbying the Government to provide adequate and effective broadband access for the 'Final Third' of the UK which currently lacks this vital infrastructure. ACRE is also active in a diverse partnership aiming to develop a community-led approach to Next Generation Access. The objective is that communities excluded from market-led high speed broadband will be supported to develop their own local solutions using RCAN's community development workers providing access to technical expertise and infrastructure delivery partners.

ACRE's rural vision

Our vision is that rural communities will increasingly take a leading role in ensuring the social, environmental and economic well-being of all their residents. They will do this in a way that provides for the present generation and also plans for future needs and future challenges. RCAN members will be there to stimulate their thinking, support their work and help turn their aspirations into reality.



Issue

digital services in rural areas are patchy and slow

In rural areas there is a demonstrable lack of access to digital technology, namely inadequate broadband and mobile phone coverage. This excludes communities from the full benefits that digital technology brings and results in businesses being less sustainable due to increased necessity to use digital services and mobile working. It can also mean inequitable access to service delivery from the private and public sectors, along with less opportunity to communicate within and outside of their community. Educationally, children and lifelong learners can be disadvantaged, specifically from e-learning, because of the increasing tendency for pupil's homework and resources to be put online.

Solution Bridging the digital divide in rural areas

RCAN members play a vital role in delivery of solutions surrounding access to high quality digital services in rural communities.

Suffolk ACRE's Wireless Community Broadband Network, a community-owned wireless network, provided broadband Internet to homes and businesses in seven rural communities in Suffolk. The project operated between 2004 and 2006 but with further funding the lessons learnt could be replicated elsewhere. Aiming to bridge the digital divide locally, each village received support from

key community groups such as parish councils, village halls and churches. The latter being particularly important as the main antennas were sited on the top of church towers. However within six months of the project going live BT dramatically accelerated its exchange activation programme to avoid losing customers. As a result, the project was prematurely terminated as most customers' needs were being met by BT. Even though the Community Network did not meet its customer target projections it can be deemed successful because it ensured rural communities were not disadvantaged digitally.

Issue

delivering better access to services

Providing a good range of services to rural communities is a fundamental problem in rural communities (see ACRE's Policy Position Paper on Services). Rural people travel longer distances and spend a higher proportion of their income on transport to meet their basic needs.

Solution Broadband brings remote rural communities and service providers together

Effective use of new technologies is one of the ways that less accessible communities can get better access to the goods and services they need and want. Local communities working with RCAN members can ensure that the hard to reach are not excluded because of where they live.

Two Dales Live was a pilot project in North Yorkshire supported by Rural Action Yorkshire. It enabled people living in five remote and sparsely populated villages to contact different service providers using broadband resulting in these providers delivering new services to these communities. No IT knowledge was assumed or needed as a touch screen allowed users to connect to their chosen service provider. The system enabled confidential face to face interviews, document sharing, signatures and photographs to be transferred via a broadband connection.

A key aim of Two Dales Live was to tackle rural disadvantage and the issues caused by distance

and isolation in these remote areas. Residents could save time and money by accessing services locally and not needing to make long journeys. It empowered communities to improve the places in which they live by shaping services to be more responsive to their needs, saved costs on travel and reduced carbon emissions.

Broadband for All is an enhanced wireless broadband system transmitted through the local village hall in Barley, a very rural community in the Pendle Valley, Lancashire. It means that members of the community and local businesses can access services comparable with urban areas, feel less isolated and are able to make their area a more enjoyable place to live and work. The local education service, community volunteers and local businesses led on the project. They established Broadband for All as a social enterprise with the help of Community Futures the RCAN member, using its expertise to bridge gaps in social and entrepreneurial knowledge.



Issue

Next Generation Access is likely to focus on profitable urban areas

The provision of Next Generation Access (NGA) is expected to be driven by the profit motives of the supplying telecoms companies, not the benefits to the end user. Its delivery will take longer, be more expensive and complex in rural areas.

Solution Local community future proofing

Communities have been shown capable of developing their own solutions to improve digital inclusion in their areas. The completed initiatives have illustrated that the infrastructure developed by the communities can be offered to service providers at a profitable rate and have benefits for other community activities.

Suffolk ACRE's Community Owned Next Generation Broadband Access Networks

project aims to build high speed (50-100Mb per second) broadband access networks that can be owned by local communities. The approach has helped rural communities build their own fibre optic based networks which they can then offer to service providers at a profitable rate. This will enable a reasonable long-term return on the capital investment together with short-term dividends that can be used to finance other community initiatives. It also ensures that individuals and local businesses are not disadvantaged by a growing digital divide. The telecoms infrastructure has actually enabled the creation of new knowledge-based local

economies giving a financial return to the community making it a sustainable solution.

The Martley Webmesh in Worcestershire was set up when it was recognised that the lack of broadband access was becoming critical to local residents and businesses. A 'web mesh' is a wireless net system, which is an affordable and quite widely used technique to distribute broadband without the need for a phone line. Martley Webmesh has increased connectivity in Martley and reached out to surrounding villages, built more reliability and robustness into the existing telecom network and provided technical support to local users and to new mesh communities. The project provides free IT courses locally and a free access point in the village hall. It has purchased more bandwidth and with improved technology, has helped increase connection speeds dramatically. As a direct result of this project and other voluntary initiatives there is also much more awareness of the facilities Martley has to offer, such as the local transport provision, clubs and societies.

About ACRE

Action with Communities in Rural England is the national umbrella body of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), which operates at national, regional and local level in support of rural communities across the country. We aim to promote a healthy, vibrant and sustainable rural community sector that is well connected to policy and decision-makers who play a part in delivering this aim. ACRE is nationally recognised for its expertise in ensuring rural community-led solutions are central to public policy debate.

ACRE is a member of:

- Homes & Communities Agency Rural Housing Advisory Group
- Age UK Rural Advisory Group
- Ministerial Task Force on climate change, the environment and sustainable development
- The new national rural coalition, under the chairmanship of Matthew Taylor MP, which aims to take forward his 2008 proposals to government on a Living, Working, Countryside.

Rural Community Action Network (RCAN)

The RCAN comprises 38 Rural Community Councils (RCCs) at local level, RCC regional groupings and their national arm in ACRE, providing coverage of all rural areas throughout England. RCCs are county-based, independent, local development agencies that, for decades, have been delivering support on the ground to enable rural communities to improve quality of life for all. They act as a strategic voice for rural communities, allowing grassroots issues to be championed and solutions worked out in partnership between statutory, voluntary and private sector providers. Their strength lies in their ability to work within communities in an inclusive and holistic way, helping local people to develop local solutions and identify unmet needs through a unique approach to community-led planning. Alongside this, RCCs provide a trusted local support network for rural community groups, including dedicated expertise in arenas such as transport, housing, the management of community-owned facilities, social enterprise and rural services.

RCAN national coverage, local reach

Members of the RCAN have a long history of supporting communities to find solutions to their needs. We do this by supporting all sections of the community to plan for the future and by developing relevant services that meet the needs of all generations. We do this with a passion for social inclusion, and high standards throughout the network.

Network members:

- Provide genuine reach into rural communities across England, linking national, regional and local policy with community action at the grassroots
- Promote and develop local solutions that benefit the social, environmental and economic well-being of communities
- Act as a focal point for partners across statutory, private and voluntary sectors, working together to benefit rural communities
- Tackle disadvantage by ensuring their work within rural communities reaches out to marginalised groups and encourages the development of local services for those least able to travel.

This document is one of a series covering the following topics, Rural Challenges, Community Led Planning, Climate Change, Rural Community Buildings, Housing, Rural Services, Transport, Sustainable Communities, Social Inclusion, Older People, Children & Young People, Healthcare and Digital Inclusion.



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