

**MID TERM EVALUATION OF DEFRA'S INVESTMENT IN  
RCAN/ACRE 2011-15**

**FINAL REPORT**

**Report commissioned by Defra**

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## Executive Summary

### Purpose

This mid-term evaluation was commissioned by Defra to assess progress and impacts from its investment in RCAN/ACRE during the first two years (2011-13) of a four year Agreement. It was produced by Brian Wilson Associates with David Atkinson Consulting and Rob Hindle of Rural Solutions.

RCAN is the Rural Community Action Network, which comprises ACRE and 38 county-based organisations covering rural England. They are charitable local development agencies which support and enable initiatives in rural communities. ACRE is Action with Communities in Rural England, the national umbrella body for RCAN and the accountable body for this Defra investment.

### Agreement

Under the four year Agreement the network has delivered against three activities (called *pillars*):

- Strategic involvement locally, to influence the delivery of policies to the benefit of rural communities (pillar one);
- Support for individual rural communities, to help them take forward initiatives, through capacity-building and local action (pillar two);
- Intelligence gathering to support national and local policy making and monitoring (pillar three).

Cutting across the pillars have been four *priority themes* on: i) housing and planning; ii) transport, services and facilities; iii) fuel poverty and energy generation; and iv) broadband.

### Funding

Defra has invested £6 million as grant-in-aid in the RCAN network – £3.2 million in 2011/12 and £2.8 million in 2012/13. The bulk of this was distributed among the local RCAN members according to a formula.

The Defra investment has been spent: 38% on housing and planning; 36% on transport, services and facilities; 14% on fuel poverty and energy generation; and 12% on broadband. RCAN members estimate they typically spend around 45% of the investment on each of pillars one and two, and the remaining 10% on pillar three.

RCAN members attract funds from other (non-Defra) sources for their rural work. Every £1.00 from Defra has been used alongside £2.80 from other sources.

There is a third block of funding which RCAN members receive for work of a different nature (including in urban areas and including, in some cases, being the local CVS body). The Defra investment forms between 5% and 20% of total turnover for a typical RCAN member.

However, the Defra investment has disproportionate influence over their work, not least because it is a relatively (and uniquely) flexible pot of money which can be used to pursue opportunities, add value and work across policy boundaries.

Most of the non-Defra funding for rural work is for community support (pillar two). Defra is generally the only funder for local (rural) influencing activity and intelligence gathering.

The main other funders of RCAN community support work are local authorities, but income comes from a wide array of sources including other public bodies, the Lottery, charities and private sponsors. With pressure on public funding, many RCAN members are exploring more financially sustainable models and many have started charging communities to use their support and services.

It is debatable whether the RCAN network has yet become less dependent on central Government funding. A few RCAN members have, but generally the picture was one of little change between 2011/12 and 2012/13.

### Activities

A significant number and range of activities were undertaken by the RCAN network. 860 activities were logged during 2011-13 by the eight RCAN members that were examined in detail during this study. The largest number (333) related to transport, services and facilities and the lowest number (109) related to broadband.

Pillar one activities could largely be classified under three headings, namely: rural proofing local policy and strategy documents; creating rural evidence to inform local policies; and acting as a rural voice on partnerships.

Pillar two activities could largely be classified under four headings, namely: promoting policy opportunities to rural communities; supporting them with independent advice and brokering solutions; helping communities help themselves through training and resources; and directly delivering services to rural communities.

### Outcomes

108 outcomes were achieved during 2011-13 in the eight RCAN areas examined in detail. Once again the highest number (43) related to transport, services and facilities and the lowest number (9) related to broadband.

Examples of pillar one outcomes that benefit rural areas are:

- Convincing local authorities to alter policy documents to reflect rural issues e.g. a Local Development Plan;
- Winning agreement to a new funding stream for rural support or projects; and
- Instigating a new partnership to progress issues of rural opportunity or concern.

Examples of pillar two outcomes that benefit rural communities are:

- Supporting successful bids to the Rural Community Broadband Fund;
- Establishing a new community oil bulk buying scheme; and
- Enabling the development of new affordable housing schemes.

Pillar three outcomes were also delivered, where rural intelligence from RCAN was used by Defra to help it engage more effectively with other Whitehall Departments. Examples include issues such as NHS reform, public transport funding, energy efficiency and

broadband roll out. RCAN intelligence shows how national policy implementation is impacting in rural areas and where there are examples of good rural practice.

### **Beneficiary views**

Organisations interviewed and surveyed<sup>1</sup> as recipients of RCAN activity and support held positive views about working with the network. National and local stakeholders (such as local authorities) valued the reach that RCAN members had into rural communities, as well as their broad rural knowledge, the trust they had among rural communities, and their ability to work at both strategic and delivery levels. They said that RCAN helped inform their decision-making and helped engage rural communities with policy opportunities.

Three quarters of the parish/town councils responding to a survey had used RCAN advice or support in the last two years, for things such as neighbourhood planning, village hall management and community transport schemes. 92% of the users had found it either very or fairly useful e.g. enabling them to understand policy initiatives, weigh up options, submit better funding bids and initiate or make progress with projects.

Beneficiaries struggled to name other suitable organisations or networks they could turn to if RCAN were not there. Where alternative support organisations were cited, they were generally seen as not as attuned to rural issues.

### **Assessment**

This evaluation concludes that good progress has been made by RCAN with programme delivery and against the objectives that Defra set for this Agreement. Funding from Defra and other sources has generated a significant volume of activity across RCAN.

Outcomes have been achieved in all of the pillars and in all of the priority themes. All 38 local RCAN members have contributed outcomes. Rural communities have benefitted from these outcomes, both directly from the community support work and indirectly from the influencing and intelligence work.

Notably, the Defra funding helped RCAN members to start influencing and community support work on broadband, where previous to 2011 many had not engaged with this issue. The funding has also helped some RCAN members to sustain or grow their work on fuel poverty.

The programme is considered to represent good value for money. In the eight RCAN members examined in detail the 860 activities and 108 outcomes relate to roughly £0.9 million of Defra investment (2011-13). In the year 2012/13 the average RCAN member received £62,000 of Defra funding and in return delivered a broad package of local influencing, community support and intelligence provision work.

The degree of additionality achieved by Defra's investment is particularly high for pillars one (local influencing) and three (intelligence provision), since funding for it barely exists from other sources. Whilst additionality is not as high for pillar two (community support), the Defra investment still added real value: for example, it can fund developmental work and

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<sup>1</sup> Eleven organisations were interviewed and 197 parish/town councils were surveyed.

learning, where other sources only fund core costs. Beneficiaries confirmed the high degree of additionality.

A number of barriers were identified, which may have slowed progress with programme delivery. They include significant changes that impacted on RCAN stakeholders, such as changes to the rural policy landscape, reducing budgets of some RCAN funders (notably local authorities) and difficult working relationships in certain localities. Facilitators that have assisted programme delivery include new partnering opportunities, new policy/funding initiatives, growing 'localism' expectations of community action and RCAN having successful support service models it can replicate.

### **Lessons**

In terms of programme *delivery*, action could usefully now be taken to:

- Share and learn lessons from the broadband work to-date, as some RCAN members have found it harder to progress this theme;
- Share and learn lessons from RCAN members that have succeeded in engaging with LEPs, as some have found it hard to do so;
- Clarify what are realistic expectations from the RCAN network in terms of its contribution to the rural economic growth agenda;
- Use the priority themes as more of a framework within which RCAN members can prioritise according to local circumstances;
- Involve relevant other Whitehall Departments more often with the work of the expert Reference Groups;
- Continue seeking additional intelligence from relevant specialist organisations and other networks, alongside RCAN.

In terms of programme *management*, actions could usefully be taken to:

- Improve the utility of the intelligence provided to Defra and other Departments;
- Ensure the RCAN network gains some feedback about the use of its intelligence;
- Improve the recording of outcomes, building on the work of some RCAN members. This could make use of Social Return on Investment methods;
- Focus the annual monitoring report submitted to Defra more onto outcomes and best practice;
- Share and learn systematically from the innovations of many RCAN members to adopt more financially sustainable models;
- Consider using some of the Defra funding in future to support work on building more financially sustainable models for RCAN.

Some further material is contained within case studies and learning notes that have been produced alongside this evaluation report.

# Main Report

## 1. Introduction

This mid-term evaluation was commissioned by Defra to assess progress with and impacts to-date from its investment in RCAN/ACRE, under an Agreement covering the period 2011 to 2015. Evidence from the period 2011 to 2013 is assessed in this report. It has been produced for Defra by Brian Wilson Associates with David Atkinson Consulting and Rob Hindle of Rural Solutions.

### ACRE and the RCAN network

Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) is the national umbrella body for the RCAN network. The Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) is the collective name for the 38 county-based organisations (or local RCAN members) and ACRE. Sometimes they are referred to as Rural Community Councils. They are charitable local development agencies which support and enable initiatives in rural communities. Between them, the network members cover all of rural England.

### Evaluation purpose

The aim of this evaluation has been to provide evidence to inform the remainder of the investment programme, to identify lessons and to share good practice. This last point (good practice) is addressed separately from this report in a set of case studies.

Objectives that were set for the mid-term evaluation were:

- To assess the delivery of Defra's investment against the programme's three main activities (called pillars) which are local influencing, supporting communities and intelligence provision;
- To assess the wider impact of the investment and what difference it is making for rural communities;
- To assess success against the objectives that were set for the programme (better RCAN support for policy delivery in rural areas, helping communities to take more action themselves and providing intelligence which has an impact);
- To identify factors which contribute to success or failure in programme implementation; and
- To review the current programme and draw out lessons for future implementation.

Defra was keen that the evaluation should map out the range and types of benefits that were being generated from its investment.

### Evaluation methodology

The evaluation was conducted using a methodology set out in the consultants tender and refined with the project Steering Group at the outset of the research. This included various document reviews, interviews with Defra, ACRE, local RCAN members and stakeholders,

and the running of a survey. Details of the methodology are provided at Annex D, with all report annexed being contained in a separate volume.

### **The 2011-15 Agreement and investment objectives**

This evaluation is about work carried out by RCAN in accordance with an investment programme agreement that it holds with Defra.

The 2011-2015 Defra investment programme with ACRE and RCAN is structured around three pillars which are:

1. *Strategic involvement within local arenas to influence local delivery and enable engagement in localism and Big Society programmes.* This influencing is intended to help rural proof local policies and programmes;
2. *Promotion and support for individual communities to take forward initiatives.* This assistance for local action and capacity-building on Defra priority themes is expected to vary from one RCAN member to another, depending on capacity and expertise;
3. *Intelligence gathering to support local and national policy-making and monitoring.* This gathering of grass-roots intelligence is to assist the rural proofing of national policy making and to identify success factors or barriers for rural implementation.

A set of investment programme objectives match up with these pillars, being:

- RCAN members are more able to support delivery of Government policy in rural areas;
- Rural communities are better able to take action for themselves on the Defra priority themes, as a result of RCAN activities; and
- Intelligence provided via ACRE has a demonstrable impact on policy development at national level.

In the two years (2011-13) covered by the mid-term evaluation work under the pillars was focused on four priority themes, which were: i) housing and planning; ii) transport, services and facilities; iii) fuel poverty and energy generation; and iv) broadband<sup>2</sup>. For the third year (2013-14), which is technically outside the scope of this report, the emphasis has shifted to place the prime focus on broadband and rural economic growth.

The Agreement makes ACRE/RCAN an important delivery partner for the Defra Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU), which has the national policy lead on the rural affairs agenda. It can be seen as a lever for helping Defra to secure a step change in the level of local (community) action and one that might encourage alternate approaches to service delivery in rural areas.

Some further information providing the wider context to this Agreement can be found at annex G.

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<sup>2</sup> In practice ACRE generally submitted six monitoring reports, with separate reports on community-led planning and on community-owned assets (though they were part of the housing and planning, and the transport, services and facilities priority themes respectively).



## Management and financial arrangements

Over the evaluation period the Defra Agreement provided £6 million as grant-in-aid to ACRE and RCAN, which was split £3.2 million in 2011/12 (year 1) and £2.8 million in 2012/13 (year 2). The majority was distributed between the 38 local RCAN members according to a formula decided by ACRE and RCAN. This provided a flat sum for each member (£35k in 2011/12 and £40k in 2012/13) plus a variable sum which took account of the size and complexity of each RCAN area<sup>3</sup>. That formula was revised for 2012/13. During 2011/12 some £15k was also allocated to each regional RCAN grouping, though this arrangement ceased in year two when the formal groupings were disbanded. ACRE had a programme management fee (£90k in both years) and an amount for national delivery work (£200k in 2011/12 and £175k in 2012/13). Finally, around £100k was set aside each year<sup>4</sup> as a RCAN Reserve to fund projects of cross-network benefit.

ACRE holds an agreement with each individual local RCAN member, which provides for quarterly payment in return for complying with the schedule of monitoring reports. RCAN members must submit timely and good quality information.

The investment programme has been overseen by a Defra/ACRE Governance Group, which provided strategic oversight and accountability for the grant-in-aid. This group contained four members from other Government Departments or non-governmental organisations to bring an external perspective.

There has also been a Keep in Touch (KIT) group, a working level group made up of officers within Defra (RCPU) and ACRE. This has met more regularly and has been the means for reviewing programme delivery and shaping the requirements from intelligence reports.

ACRE also initiated expert Reference Groups under each of the priority themes, where relevant Defra policy officers (and sometimes staff from other Departments) could have direct contact with ACRE and RCAN staff, through meetings and online discussion forums.

Reporting arrangements have evolved over the two years. They have included:

- An annual report from ACRE to Defra at the end of each year, giving an outline summary of what each local RCAN member did and how it spent the funding;
- A set of monitoring reports linked to the priority themes, which ACRE submitted to Defra. In year one these were submitted quarterly and provided information about RCAN activities as well as local intelligence. In year two they were submitted half-yearly and were shortened to focus down on the policy messages arising from local intelligence;
- Occasional special reports were submitted during year two, when Defra asked ACRE and RCAN to provide local intelligence about specific topics of policy interest.

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<sup>3</sup> It takes account of rural population, rural disadvantage, geographic area and the number of local authorities.

<sup>4</sup> The figures were £112k in 2011/12 and £98k in 2012/13.

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It should be noted that behind these reports lay a significant flow of detailed monitoring reports from each RCAN member in to ACRE. ACRE's task has been to summarise them and to pull out issues of interest for the composite reports that it submits to Defra.

In year one Defra provided formal feedback reports to ACRE/RCAN to explain how the intelligence was used. This was discontinued when Defra simplified the programme monitoring arrangements to streamline the management workload.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author's would like to acknowledge the advice and assistance given by the Steering Group for this evaluation project, which had representatives from Defra, ACRE and Cabinet Office. The consultant team were aided by the wealth of programme information that ACRE and Defra made available.

Eight of the local RCAN members gave up senior management time to speak at some length to the evaluation consultants. Staff in various other organisations agreed to be interviewed (as stakeholders of RCAN/ACRE) and a substantial number of parish or town councils kindly completed a survey form. We are grateful to the Rural Services Network for distributing that survey on our behalf.

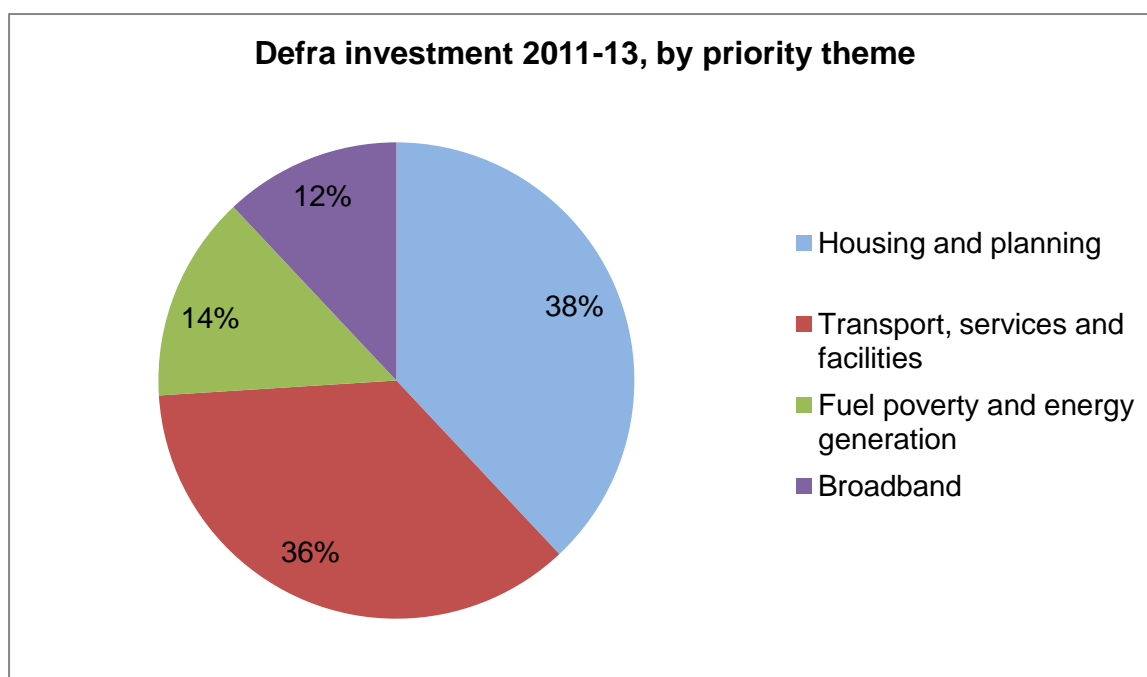
## 2. Funding

For the purposes of this evaluation, RCAN members can be seen as having three pots of money. In ascending order of size, they are: the Defra investment; funding for rural work that comes from other sources (which is used alongside Defra's money); and further income streams which feature in their total organisational turnover.

### Defra funding

Over the two years 2011-13 some £5.4 million of Defra's investment was recorded<sup>5</sup> across the four priority themes by the 38 local RCAN members and ACRE. This spend figure excludes the ACRE management fee and the Reserve Fund.

The spread of that spending across the four priority themes was: £2.0 million on housing and planning; £1.9 million on transport, services and facilities; £0.8 million on fuel poverty and energy generation; and £0.7 million on broadband.



Expenditure has not been accounted for by the pillars, but most of the eight visited RCAN members estimated they spent something in the order of 45% on pillar 1 or local influencing, 45% on pillar 2 or community support and 10% on pillar 3 or providing intelligence.

### Other funding sources

Over the same two years another £15.2 million of funding from other sources (i.e. not this Defra investment) was spent across the priority themes by the 38 local RCAN members and ACRE. This funding is therefore shown in the ACRE/RCAN monitoring reports. In certain cases this could be described as 'match-funding', where Defra money has specifically

<sup>5</sup> These expenditure records are taken from the annual reports.

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leveraged funding from elsewhere. However, evidence from the RCAN member visits is that more often it is not technically match-funding, but rather money that was used alongside the Defra investment.

The overall ratio of Defra funding to funding from other sources (2011-13) was 1 to 2.8. Ratios for the four priority themes vary and were:

- Housing and planning = 1 to 2.2
- Transport, services and facilities = 1 to 4.5
- Fuel poverty and energy generation = 1 to 1.8
- Broadband = 1 to 0.8

It is clearly easier to attract funding for certain priority themes than for others. Almost all the local RCAN members attracted some funding from other sources for work on: housing and planning; transport, services and facilities; and fuel poverty and energy generation. Less than half of them attracted funding from other sources for work on broadband.

### **Wider turnover**

The £15.2 million figure above should not be confused with total funding attracted by RCAN members i.e. their turnover. RCAN members typically attract larger sums again for work that is not associated with the pillars and priority themes. In some cases much of this may not be spent in rural areas. For example, three of the visited RCAN members are also CVSs and one is the local Healthwatch. Among the eight RCAN members examined in detail for this study Defra funding represented between 5% and 20% of total turnover.

It should, however, be noted that ACRE and RCAN members consider the amount of Defra funding understates its importance to them. This is something we return to later.

### **Dependency on central Government funding**

Against some headline measures the RCAN network, as a whole, is becoming less dependent on central Government funding. However, when looked at in detail the situation is complex, with big differences between RCAN members and between different areas of work. A few large gains in funding from other sources skew the overall picture.

We have accurate figures for making a short-term comparison i.e. to compare 2011/12 with 2012/13. It is recognised that funding for individual RCAN members may fluctuate notably from one year to the next, as new contracts or grant streams are won and others conclude, particularly as public sector funders move toward more commissioning of service delivery.

In one obvious sense RCAN has become less dependent on central Government funding. Defra's investment in RCAN/ACRE was less in 2012/13 (£2.8 million) than it had been in 2011/12 (£3.2 million). That investment has reduced by another 10% in 2013/14.

Moreover, despite the difficult funding environment the amount coming in to RCAN members from other sources (and accounted for against Defra priority themes) rose during the period

under evaluation. In 2011/12 funding from other sources amounted to £6.6 million and in 2012/13 funding from other sources was £8.5 million. That is a 28% increase.

This overall picture needs qualification, not least because the situation varies markedly, with almost all of the increase occurring against one priority theme. Our analysis shows:

- There was a 53% rise in other funding for transport, services and facilities;
- There was a 3% rise in other funding for fuel poverty and energy generation; and
- There was a 1% rise in other funding for housing and planning;
- There was a 10% drop in other funding for broadband.

There is equally much variation among the local RCAN members, which may reflect both longer term trends and year-to-year fluctuations. Analysis shows that between 2011/12 and 2012/13:

- 23 local RCAN members saw an increase in funding from other sources; whilst
- 15 local RCAN members saw a decrease in funding from other sources.

It is important to add that whilst many of these changes were relatively modest, there were three cases where local RCAN members made spectacular gains. In all cases this was for work on services/facilities. If these three gains in funding from other sources are taken out of the equation the picture becomes one of little change between 2011/12 and 2012/13. In other words, the gains made by the remaining 20 local RCAN members who saw an increase (23 minus 3) are almost balanced out by the losses of the 15 who saw a decrease<sup>6</sup>.

One other way to consider the dependency question is to say that in 2012/13 there were 8 local RCAN members whose funding from other sources was at least five times their funding from the Defra investment. There are, however, a few RCAN members that still appear to rely heavily on Defra's investment. In 2012/13 there were 6 reporting less funding from other sources than from the Defra investment. In 2 of these cases it was a great deal less.

So the picture is mixed, but there is widespread evidence of RCAN members seeking to reduce their dependency by, variously:

- Winning financially significant local delivery contracts or service level agreements;
- Diversifying their income by attracting funding from a widening range of sources;
- Generating income by levying charges or fees for the use of their services or assets.

### **Other funding sources being accessed by RCAN**

Funding comes from a wide range of sources. Local authority funding may be the most common, but the Big Lottery, other Departments, RDPE, funds and donations all feature in the mix. There is considerable evidence that RCAN members are generating income from service charges, fees, commissions and the like.

The analysis which follows is based on the eight visited RCAN members.

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<sup>6</sup> Without the three spectacular gains, the increase in other funding for transport, services and facilities is only 3%.

**Housing and planning:** for this priority theme all eight RCAN members received funding during 2011-13 from other sources, though in some cases all (or nearly all) of it was for housing and in some cases all (or nearly all) of it was for planning. By and large the other funding paid for support with affordable housing (especially Rural Housing Enabler work) and with community-led planning (and now neighbourhood planning).

The funding sources have a bias towards housing and planning authorities, with some RCAN members introducing service charges or fees. Sources were:

- District Councils (in 5 out of 8 cases)
- County Councils (4)
- Unitary Councils (2)
- Regional local authority group (1)
- Registered Providers/Housing Associations (3)
- National Park Authorities (2)
- Rural Development Plan for England (1)
- Service charges and/or commission (3)
- RCAN member's reserves (1)
- Miscellaneous income (1)

**Transport, services and facilities:** again, all eight RCAN members received funding from other sources during 2011-13. This was more often used for services/facilities work than for transport work. Much of it helped to pay for a village halls advisory service. Transport funding tended to be for community transport support or Wheels to Work schemes.

The funding sources were particularly diverse. Local authorities remain important. However, the Big Lottery stands out and income was generated from a variety of fees, charges and commission, as well as being raised from private sector sponsors and donations. Sources were:

- County Council (in 4 out of 8 cases)
- District Councils (3)
- Unitary Councils (3)
- LAA performance reward grant (1)
- Regional local authority group (1)
- The Big Lottery (6)
- Diocese/Church of England (1)
- Digital Switchover Programme (1)
- Department of Health (1)
- Department of Transport (1)
- English Heritage (1)
- Aggregates Levy COMMA Fund (1)
- RDPE and LEADER (3)
- Private sector sponsor/donations (2)
- Charitable or Trust Fund (2)
- Membership fees/subscriptions (2)
- Support service charges (1)
- Transport hire charges (1)
- Community building hire (1)
- Insurance commission (1)
- Training fees (1)

**Fuel poverty and energy generation:** once again, all eight RCAN members received funding from other sources during 2011-13. A good deal of it appears to have helped with the establishment and development of oil bulk buying schemes. Various energy audit schemes are also beneficiaries, including those for community buildings.

Sources of funding follow a different pattern for this priority theme. The Calor FREE initiative (which ended in April 2013) was a key source, as was the Department of Health's Warmer Homes Healthy People fund. There is some evidence of income generation. Sources were:

- County Council (in 3 out of 8 cases)
- Regional local authority group (1)
- Calor FREE initiative (7)
- Department of Health/National Health Service (5)
- Department for Energy & Climate Change (2)
- The Big Lottery (2)
- Not-for-profit business donation (1)
- Charitable or Trust Fund (2)
- Private donations/League of Friends (2)
- Income from oil bulk buying scheme (2)
- Other project income (1)

**Broadband:** as with the wider RCAN family, only four of these eight RCAN members received funding from other sources during 2011-13. In each case that funding came from just one funder and those funders varied. The LEP funding may be of particular interest to Defra and RCAN<sup>7</sup>.

The four funding sources were:

- Regional local authority group (in 1 out of 8 cases)
- Local Enterprise Partnership (1)
- The Big Lottery (1)
- Project income (1)

It is evident from both the analysis and discussions with RCAN members that funding from other sources is largely for pillar two activities i.e. providing support services to individual rural communities. Sometimes funding exists for projects that have a strategic policy value e.g. research (which can reasonably be classified as pillar one), but funding from other sources does not exist for advocacy or policy influencing activity per se. Nor is there funding from other local sources for pillar three or intelligence gathering.

The other national funding which was recorded by ACRE is that it received from the Office for Civil Society (Cabinet Office) and from the Big Lottery BASIS programme.

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<sup>7</sup> The LEP gave match-funding for use alongside Defra funding on demand stimulation work.



### 3. Activities

Defra's investment in the network, together with funding from other sources, has paid for a significant volume of activity by ACRE and local RCAN members. This chapter reviews the scale and type of those activities, its main purpose being to give an insight into the work of RCAN enabled by the Defra Agreement. The following chapter will then consider the outcomes resulting from these activities.

#### Shaping and funding of RCAN activities

RCAN activities are often funded from a mix of sources and it is not possible to disentangle this funding mix on an activity-by-activity basis. We do know that 26% of the funding for these activities came from the Defra investment, though this figure varies markedly between pillars.

RCAN members consistently argue that Defra's investment is worth more to them than the actual sums involved. They consider that:

- Receiving central Government funding and having that formal link with central Government enhances their *credibility* with local partner organisations, not least those who help to fund the rural work. RCAN members frequently cite the Defra investment when they submit local bids for funding;
- The Defra investment is typically the only funding pot received by RCAN members where there is some *flexibility* as to its use. Most local authority funding now comes in contracts that are highly specified in terms of how it must be used. Other public sector or charitable funding is similarly tied to project delivery;
- It follows that Defra's funding is what generally allows RCAN members to undertake work of a *developmental* nature, exploring rural policy issues or opportunities that arise. It also buys them some time to work up local funding bids;
- Defra's investment is typically what pays for *strategic* rural work by RCAN members. This includes senior engagement with local stakeholder organisations and developing partnership working in order to gain influence. It can also include activity to join-up information and lessons across the rural work in order to add value;
- The Defra funding agreement, whilst it has been subject to review, has a longer *time horizon* than other RCAN funding sources, which are typically awarded for one year. This allows for better planning of activities and resource management;
- Whilst this should not be exaggerated, Defra funding does sometimes achieve direct *leverage* over other match-funding sources that are won by RCAN members.

The Defra agreement, with its four priority themes and three pillars, has directly informed and shaped the work of the eight visited RCAN members. In one visited RCAN member this was particularly clear, with an action plan and work streams having been developed in 2011 to mirror the agreement.

There is a range of influences on RCAN members' work and typically the 'ask' in the Defra agreement is (an important) one that sits alongside what other funders have contracted. Wider organisational objectives may also come into this mix. At least one RCAN member



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noted that the Defra agreement ensures retention of a rural focus, since other funders may have a communities or a civil society sector focus to their funding. This is more of an issue in RCAN areas which are mixed rural-urban i.e. less obviously rural counties.

This need to pull together objectives from Defra and other funders was generally seen as perfectly manageable. Most RCAN members felt the priority themes were a good fit with other work they were doing or were sufficiently broad in scope anyway.

Two issues that were cited were:

- Those who felt otherwise, seeing the four themes as too restrictive and not leaving enough room to adapt to local circumstances e.g. if a theme is already well covered by other organisations, if a topic outside the themes is a local need;
- Where RCAN members had not been delivering work on a topic such as housing or transport for historic or local reasons, they found it harder to meet that element of the Defra agreement.

It is worth adding that two of the visited RCAN members said they would not have done work on broadband had it not been for the Defra agreement. The Defra funding had enabled them to start work on this (new for them) policy topic. Two RCAN members also said they were unlikely to have had such a focus on fuel poverty and energy generation without the Defra funding. This may be especially true now the Calor FREE initiative funding has ended.

### Scale of activities

The activities of the eight local RCAN members have been assessed by reviewing the monitoring reports they submitted to ACRE throughout the period 2011-13. All the activities reported by them have been logged by pillar and by theme.

The analysis has found that during 2011-13:

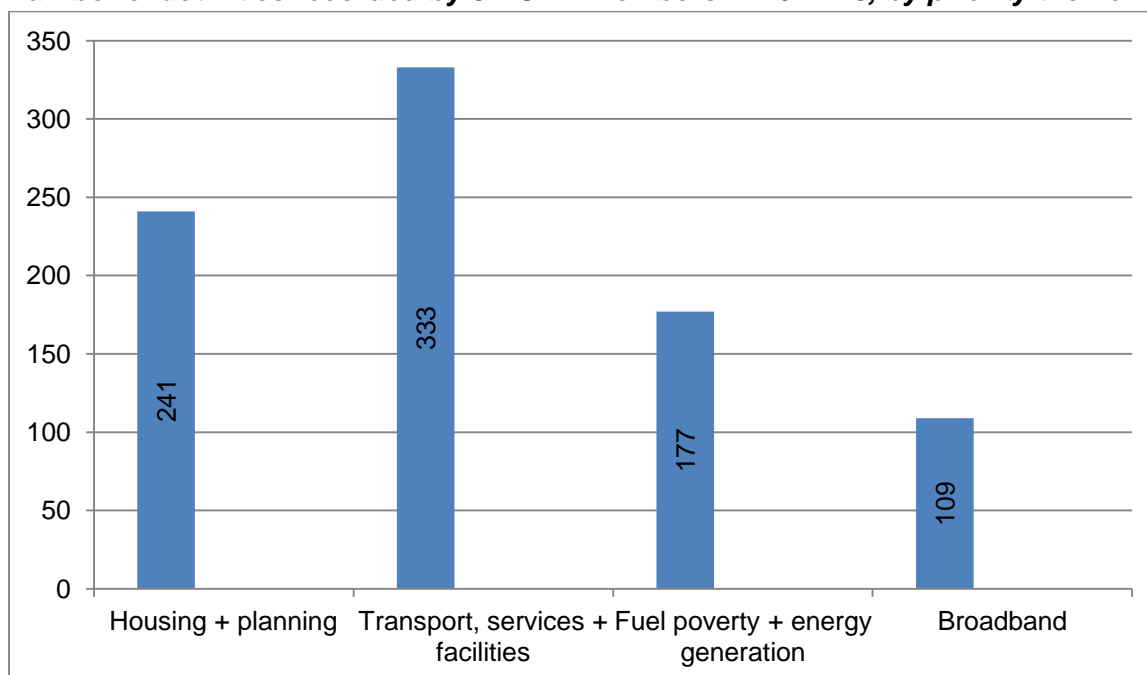
- 860 activities were carried out by the eight local RCAN members visited, which indicates that around 4,000 activities were carried out across the whole network.
- In the eight sampled RCAN members the largest number of activities relate to the transport, services and facilities theme, whilst the lowest number relate to the broadband theme.
- In the eight sampled RCAN members 470 activities related to pillar one (local influencing) and 390 relate to pillar two (community support).

The way in which the number of activities has been scaled up (in the box above) to get an estimate for the whole RCAN network is explained in annex H. That annex also explains the reasons why it is important to take all counts of activities quoted in this chapter as indicative.

Analysis of the 860 activities carried out by the eight sample members is shown by priority theme in the chart below. The distribution is similar to that for funding. The largest number

of activities (333) is for transport, services and facilities work and the lowest number (109) is for broadband work.

**Number of activities recorded by 8 RCAN members in 2011-13, by priority theme**



**Types of activities**

Examples of the types of activities that were recorded against the four priority themes are shown below.

*Housing and planning:*

- Sitting on partnerships, responding to consultations and negotiating to influence Local Plans, strategies and investment plans;
- Providing rural evidence and good practice to inform local policy implementation;
- Undertaking needs surveys and brokerage work to enable the delivery of rural affordable housing.

Example: In 2012 the RCAN member for Northumberland responded to an initial consultation document on policy options for the area's Local Plan, making the case on rural affordable housing provision amongst other things. On the back of this it secured a meeting with the local authority's Head of Planning. There have been other meetings since and the RCAN member has responded to a further iteration of the Local Plan. It has also taken actions to encourage Parish Councils to engage with the Local Plan development.

*Transport, services and facilities:*

- Facilitating community feedback about proposed changes to bus services;
- Working with local authorities on the design of asset transfer and service delegation schemes;
- Supporting the operation of Village Agent and Good Neighbour schemes.

*Fuel poverty and energy generation:*

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- Helping partnerships develop bids under the Warm Homes Healthy People initiative;
- Mapping those rural areas which are off the mains gas grid;
- Direct support for community energy efficiency schemes including bulk oil buying.

Example: The RCAN member for Lincolnshire is an active member of the Broadband Delivery Partnership in that County. It has also undertaken contracted work to recruit, manage and support a network of community Broadband Champions. Setting this up required a large number of meetings. Training is being provided to help the Broadband Champions adapt their roles as local broadband roll out progresses.

### *Broadband:*

- Working with local authorities on the development of Local Broadband Plans;
- Raising broadband awareness among rural communities through talks and events;
- Supporting those communities who expressed an interest in applying to the Rural Communities Broadband Fund.

## Roles of RCAN members

The above lists of typical activity types can be rationalised to identify a number of roles that have been performed by local RCAN members across these priority themes. At least seven roles have been identified by the evaluation, as shown in the graphic below. The first three relate to pillar one and the last four relate to pillar two.

### ***Roles performed by local RCAN members***

- Rural proofing local policy and strategy documents as they are developed
- Creating rural evidence to inform local policy making and implementation
- Acting as a voice for rural communities on local partnerships
- Promoting opportunities to communities arising from policy developments
- Supporting communities with independent advice and brokered solutions
- Helping other communities to help themselves with training and resources
- Assisting communities by directly delivering certain services to them

## Pillar three activities

There are, of course, other activities which were undertaken for pillar three on the provision of intelligence. They included: local RCAN members retaining appropriate records and completing the monitoring forms; ACRE distilling and summarising the considerable volume of information it received, in order to produce the intelligence reports; and the Defra (RCPU)

staff member who manages this Agreement making sure those intelligence reports were forwarded to and followed-up with appropriate policy leads within the Unit.

It appears that local RCAN members have been diligent in completing and submitting the monitoring forms to ACRE. No gaps have been uncovered by this evaluation.

ACRE also managed the establishment and oversight of expert Reference Groups, recruiting members and organising meetings, amongst other things. In some cases policy makers from other Departments attended these, allowing for a three-way dialogue between ACRE/ RCAN, Defra and the responsible policy Department. The submission of intelligence (in monitoring reports) can also generate one-to-one follow-up contact between Defra and ACRE, where items spark particular interest or need clarification.

This regular flow of intelligence to Defra has been of different types:

- Noting trends and innovations in local community action in rural areas;
- Providing evidence of the extent and shape of rural community engagement with new policy initiatives;
- Identifying factors that may facilitate or obstruct policy implementation in rural areas;
- Raising concerns about the way certain national policy decisions affect rural services;
- Describing the rural impacts of reducing budgets or changing funding allocations.

These intelligence reports have covered six topics (under the four priority themes), which are: housing and planning; community led planning; transport and services; community owned assets; fuel poverty and energy generation; and broadband. The reports typically contained intelligence about 3 or 4 issues that were identified against each of the topics.

***Some examples of issues raised by the intelligence***

<p>Housing and planning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact of the Affordable Rent policy in different rural areas.</li> <li>• How CIL is being implemented locally and the rural implications.</li> </ul>	<p>Community owned assets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact of changes to music licensing regulations for village halls.</li> <li>• Expansion of local authority asset transfer policies.</li> </ul>
<p>Community led plans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extent of local authority support for Neighbourhood Planning groups.</li> <li>• Changes in local authority funding for community led planning activities.</li> </ul>	<p>Fuel poverty and energy generation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness of new energy efficiency schemes among rural communities.</li> <li>• Lack of incentives for private landlords to improve properties.</li> </ul>
<p>Transport and services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of local funding for Wheels to Work schemes.</li> <li>• Experience of engaging with new Clinical Commissioning Groups.</li> </ul>	<p>Broadband:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interest in and take-up of the Rural Community Broadband Fund.</li> <li>• Delays to local broadband plans as a result of State Aids issues.</li> </ul>

It is worth adding that a few examples have been identified of local RCAN members who engaged nationally as a result of their experience or a particular initiative they managed. One of those interviewed for this evaluation sat on the national Wheels to Work Steering Group, whilst another was inputting to a Departmental strategy as a result of its Suicide Prevention Training Project.

## 4. Outcomes

This chapter focuses on the scale, type and impact of the outcomes delivered from the Defra investment programme.

The analysis has found that during 2011-13:

- Demonstrable outcomes benefiting rural communities have been achieved across all the pillars and priority themes, with all RCAN members contributing.
- In the eight sampled RCAN members 108 outcomes were generated, which indicates that around 550 outcomes may have been generated across the whole network.
- As with activities, in the eight RCAN members the largest number of outcomes relate to the transport, services and facilities theme, whilst the lowest number relate to the broadband theme.
- Outcomes include the alteration of local policies and investment programmes, the generation of new funding streams, the implementation of community-led actions and RCAN intelligence being used by Defra to engage with other Whitehall Departments.

Some examples of outcomes delivered under each pillar are detailed in case studies published alongside this report.

### Definitions

It is not straightforward to define an outcome for an investment programme of this type.

For pillar one an outcome is defined as something (e.g. policy, delivery plan, funding) which changed in a way that should benefit rural communities as a result of an RCAN member's local influencing activity.

For pillar two an outcome is usually defined as a service, asset or facility in a rural area which has been created or improved after receiving advice or support from an RCAN member.

Pillar three is a two step process, with ACRE/RCAN providing intelligence to Defra and Defra then deciding how or whether to use it with other Departments. An outcome has been achieved when intelligence generated helps Defra carry out its national rural proofing role.

There is always the possibility that outcomes would have come about anyway, without the RCAN member intervention, and this is tested in the following chapter on beneficiary views. An expanded version of these outcome definitions is provided at annex H.

Pillar	Inputs	Activities	Outcomes
One	Defra and other funding. Local RCAN staff time.	Examples: responding to a consultation draft; sitting on a steering group.	Example: policies are reworded in a local plan document.
Two	Defra and other funding. Local RCAN staff time.	Examples: responding to enquiries for advice; running a training session.	Examples: a community shop opens; village hall installs energy efficient measures.
Three	Defra funding. ACRE and local RCAN staff time.	Example: a concern with policy implementation is raised with Defra.	Example: Defra raises the matter with Department X, using RCAN evidence.

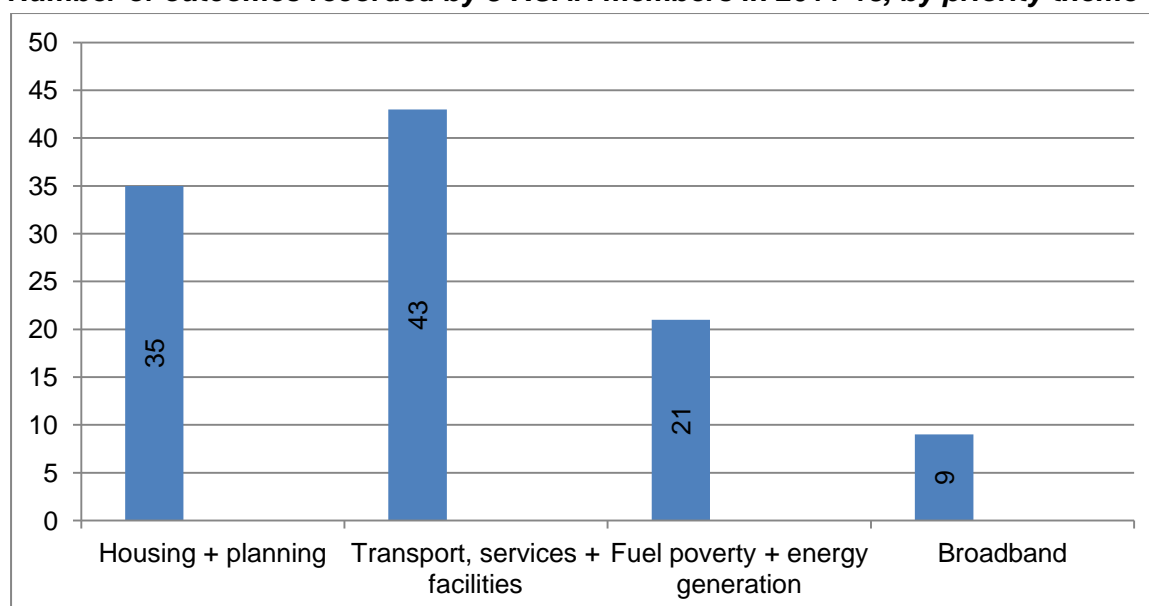
### Analysis

As with the activities, there is no claim made here that all outcomes are of equal value. Rather a few metrics have been calculated to give an idea of their scale and type. A health warning about the count of outcomes can be found at annex H.

From the summary monitoring reports that ACRE submitted to Defra during 2011-13 a total of 369 outcomes have been logged against pillars one and two from the 38 local RCAN members. These were outcomes cited in the summary reports. There is of course variation, but the work of each RCAN member has generated some outcomes.

72 of those 369 outcomes were generated by the eight RCAN members visited for this evaluation. However, analysis of detailed monitoring returns from these eight, plus information from interviews with them, has expanded the number of outcomes logged to 108 i.e. by a factor of 1.5. If the eight RCAN members are fairly representative of the wider network this indicates that something like 550 outcomes will have been recorded by the network over the two years 2011-13<sup>8</sup>.

### **Number of outcomes recorded by 8 RCAN members in 2011-13, by priority theme**



<sup>8</sup> Another approach would be to divide 108 by 8 and multiply it by 38, which gives a similar estimate.

Analysis shows an even split, with 54 pillar one outcomes and 54 pillar two outcomes. If those outcomes are disaggregated by priority theme, the pattern is similar to that for activities. The largest number of outcomes is that for transport, services and facilities (43) and the smallest number is that for broadband (9).

### Types of outcome

This section illustrates what some of those outcomes look like. A list of all 108 outcomes logged from the eight RCAN members is tabulated at annex B. In each case it should be assumed that the outcomes (changes) referred to here were to the benefit of rural communities.

#### Pillar One (local influencing) outcomes:

- Shaping policy documents, such as a Local Development Plan, Housing Market Assessment or transport strategy document;
- Altering the policy stances of partner organisations, such as a local planning authority or a Local Enterprise Partnership;
- Winning new RCAN member funding, for things such as a RHE post, Wheels to Work scheme or energy efficiency initiative;
- Playing a key part in winning funding for another organisation's rural initiative, such as a volunteer car scheme;
- Influencing the local allocation of resources, such as from the Local Sustainable Transport Fund;
- Gaining agreement to form a new partnership, such as one addressing fuel poverty issues in the area.

By way of example, the activities of the RCAN member for Northumberland, referred to in the previous chapter, have resulted in the draft Local Plan taking an approach which now emphasises improving sustainability of all communities, including small villages, and which includes a workable (exception site) policy for rural affordable housing.

#### Pillar Two (supporting communities) outcomes:

- The identification of priorities and actions in completed community led plans that were RCAN facilitated;
- The success of bids made to the Rural Community Broadband Fund bid which were RCAN supported;
- The launch of new oil bulk buying schemes by RCAN members or with their support;
- The start-up of community transport schemes after support from RCAN members;
- The start-up of community-run retail outlets after support from RCAN members;
- The saving of threatened libraries, community centres, a minibus scheme and the like, after support from RCAN members;
- The completion on-site of new affordable housing units, following RCAN (RHE) support;
- The refurbishment of village halls and community buildings after support from RCAN members.

By way of example, the activities of the RCAN member for Lincolnshire, referred to in the previous chapter, resulted in the recruitment of 50 Broadband Champions to raise



awareness among communities and in 10,000 households expressing an interest in having a broadband connection.

More detailed examples of outcomes delivered under each pillar are described in the case studies published alongside this evaluation report.

### **Pillar three outcomes**

This evaluation has found that:

- Rural intelligence provided by the RCAN network has been actively used by Defra to help it champion the needs of rural communities with other Whitehall Departments;
- Other Departments interviewed recognised and valued the RCAN intelligence, seeing it as an important rural dimension to the various intelligence flows they receive;
- The RCAN intelligence has shown Defra and other Departments how national policies are being interpreted and implemented locally, has highlighted good rural practice and has flagged emerging issues of policy concern.

Not all intelligence can be expected to lead to an outcome. Inevitably, some will be of more and some of less interest to the Defra RCPU policy teams, depending on their own priorities and capacity to handle the intelligence. Dialogue between Defra and ACRE, through the Keep In Touch group and expert Reference Groups, helps steer the intelligence gathering towards issues of most relevance.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in interview it was Defra (RCPU) staff that provided the clearest evidence of the value of RCAN intelligence. They understood the nature of the Agreement with ACRE/RCAN, so were better able to articulate how it was used. Examples have been found where RCAN intelligence:

- Gave Defra evidence it sought about the way a national policy change was being locally interpreted or implemented and the rural implications. This enabled Defra to approach the relevant Department/agency more effectively;
- Provided Defra with 'real world' examples of new policy measures being applied in rural areas, highlighting good practice or practical challenges. This helped Defra engage positively with the relevant policy Department/agency;
- Flagged up a policy concern arising in rural areas which Defra had not previously been fully aware of. This prompted Defra to approach the relevant policy Department and agency.

Those who were contacted in other Departments were recipients of intelligence generated by RCAN. They were clear that they valued the rural intelligence received and seemed well appraised what rural messages it had for their policy area. They were not, though, always clear when intelligence had originated with ACRE/RCAN, since they may have received it indirectly through Defra RCPU's subsequent use of that intelligence<sup>9</sup>. They did recognise RCAN as offering an important rural dimension to the various intelligence flows they received, but this was as likely to refer to other direct contact they had with the network. Their wider engagement with ACRE/RCAN might include attending an expert Reference

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<sup>9</sup> One of the interviewees from another Department did see the RCAN intelligence reports, as Defra passed these on to them.



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Group or having some direct contact with ACRE. Either way, the fact is they both recognised and valued the RCAN intelligence.

It is worth adding that the contacts in other Departments saw the information flow with RCAN as a two-way process. They received grounded rural evidence and they were able to use the RCAN network to get their policies and messages out to rural communities.

This evaluation has identified that intelligence was actively used to engage with other Departments and inform their work in respect of policies and initiatives for:

- Superfast broadband – roll out of the Rural Broadband Programme and implementing the Rural Community Broadband Fund;
- Fuel poverty – planning for the Big Energy Saving Week initiative;
- Public transport – operation of the Rural Transport Fund;
- Primary healthcare – the new General Practitioner contract;
- Lottery funding – eligibility for the Reaching Communities fund; and
- Post office network – rural monitoring of the Post Office Locals model.

Three quick examples are shown below. There is a case study published alongside this report with more information about the successful use of RCAN intelligence.

Example: RCAN intelligence helped identify certain practical issues with the implementation of the Rural Communities Broadband Fund and has helped Defra to improve its operation in subsequent rounds of the fund.

Example: RCAN intelligence alerted Defra to the fact that a phasing out of the Minimum Practice Income Guarantee was likely to impact most on the incomes of smaller rural GP practices. Defra was able to take the issue up with the Department of Health.

Example: When a new Rural Transport Fund was introduced, Defra was able quickly to ask RCAN members on the transport expert Reference Group to provide advice about how it should work and challenges it might face. This helped Defra to work with Department of Transport on the fund's development.

In some cases the use of intelligence remains work in progress i.e. there are ongoing discussions, and in some cases it has resulted in a policy amendment to address rural issues. From the evidence gathered it seems likely there have been two, three or four examples, on average, which can be counted as outcomes under each of the priority themes.

Intelligence generated is most likely to be of direct use (and hence become an outcome) where it is specific about a policy issue e.g. evidencing the cause of a concern, rather than simply noting a concern. Intelligence is more usable (and so valuable) where it comes from across RCAN, so that it cannot be challenged as anecdotal. "Solid" examples of policy applications in rural areas are particularly attractive to the target audience.

The expert Reference Groups were considered to have particular value by both Defra staff and those in other Departments, as they enabled policy makers to have direct contact with local RCAN practitioners, to explore further what was happening locally and to discuss

practical ways forward. It was acknowledged that some Reference Groups had been more successful than others, notably where specific policy issues had given focus to the debate.

The above evidence about activities and outcomes across the three pillars, most of which comes from ACRE/RCAN documentation, was tested further by seeking the views of some of those who were or might be beneficiaries. It is to that evidence we now turn.

## 5. Views of beneficiaries

The stakeholder interviews and surveys show that:

- Local authorities and public agencies value the reach RCAN members have into rural communities, their broad understanding of rural issues, the trust they have among rural communities, and their ability to play both a delivery and strategic role.
- Those authorities and agencies felt that, amongst other things, RCAN members had improved their decision-making and helped them produce policy or delivery documents better suited to rural needs.
- Three quarters of parish and town councils responding to a survey had used advice or support from their RCAN member and 92% of these felt it had either been useful (19%) or very useful (73%).
- Most local beneficiaries could not identify another organisation they could turn to for advice/support to meet their needs. Most of those able to name another source felt it would not be as rurally attuned as RCAN.
- Stakeholders, including those at national level, said they wished to keep working with RCAN.

This chapter draws upon evidence from three groups, chosen to mirror the three pillars of the investment programme. First, local stakeholders based in the eight areas where a RCAN member was visited for this study. These included local authorities and other civil society sector organisations, and were selected for interview as known recipients of local influencing activities. Second, parish and town councils based in the same eight areas. They completed an online survey and are potential recipients of RCAN support for individual communities. Third, national stakeholders based in Defra or other Whitehall Departments. They were interviewed as known recipients of RCAN intelligence. Further information about the beneficiaries contacted is at annex E.

This evidence offers an external (from RCAN) perspective on the activities and outcomes, and hence a further means to test their value and impact.

### Local stakeholders

The local stakeholders contacted in relation to pillar one spanned the four priority themes. They were selected from amongst a larger number of contacts provided to the evaluation consultants, with the aim of having a good geographic spread, exploring a range of policy issues and speaking to different types of organisation.

Why work with RCAN: they were asked why they chose to work with their local RCAN member. Some reasons given were distinctly rural and came up repeatedly. They were:

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- RCAN had valued contacts in and ‘reach’ into rural communities, something their organisations did not have. RCAN was their main conduit to those communities;
- RCAN had a strong understanding of rural issues and, indeed, of individual rural communities. This was broad (across policy agendas) and a source of intelligence;
- RCAN had built up trust among rural communities and was influential with them;
- RCAN could be a knowledgeable voice for rural communities on partnership groups.

Other reasons given by the stakeholders were not rural-specific. They included:

- RCAN being a trusted partner organisation with an open working style;
- RCAN having a good delivery track record and working to a high standard;
- RCAN being pro-active and having an entrepreneurial attitude;
- RCAN being a partner organisation which took a strategic view and which made connections between strategy and delivery agendas.

A few noted that the nature of the working relationship had altered as available funding had shrunk, but they hoped this had not damaged the partnership.

What difference it made: the local stakeholders were also asked what difference the RCAN member’s interventions had made. They provided the following answers, reinforcing evidence from the outcome analysis (previous chapter).

- Rural input from RCAN improved decision-making by their organisation or by a partnership;
- Evidence from RCAN shaped policy and delivery documents to the benefit of rural communities;
- Action by RCAN made rural communities more aware of policy opportunities open to them e.g. Community Rights;
- Input from RCAN alerted their organisation to concerns arising for rural communities from some policy initiative;
- Partnering by RCAN enabled the successful testing of a policy initiative in a rural setting;
- “Strategic leadership” by RCAN brought about a new partnership or new initiative.

Local stakeholders were specifically asked if RCAN activities were contributing to rural economic growth. A varied group of economic benefits were cited, including those below.

- RCAN spreading knowledge of social enterprise into rural communities;
- RCAN placing rural economy issues onto a partnership grouping’s agenda;
- RCAN helping to save local service outlets that contribute to the rural economy;
- RCAN bringing new resources into rural areas by winning funding for initiatives and projects.

Alternate organisations: when stakeholders were asked if there were other (non-RCAN) organisations they could have worked with, some took the view they probably would have had to try and engage with rural communities themselves, but this would have been time-consuming and required them to grow a large number of contacts. It would, as one put it, be “a slog”.

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Others felt there were other civil society sector organisations or networks they could work with, but these weren't as suited to the task as the RCAN member. Reasons put forward to substantiate this included: the RCAN member knowing individual rural communities; the RCAN member covering the whole county area (County Councils); other organisations not having a rural specialism; and other organisations lacking community engagement skills.

All of the local stakeholders hoped to work with their RCAN member again or to continue the existing partnership working with them. Whilst the different local stakeholders interviewed were not entirely uncritical of their RCAN members, that criticism was modest and patchy<sup>10</sup>.

### Parish and town councils

We surveyed parish and town councils in the eight sample areas asking for their views on their engagement with RCAN. We achieved 197 completed responses, about 10% of the total in the eight areas.

Recognition of RCAN: amongst those who responded there was a high level of recognition of their local RCAN member. 94% were familiar with the RCAN organisation in their area and this figure did not vary much between the eight areas.

Use of advice or support: just under three-quarters (74%) of respondents recalled using advice or support from their RCAN member during the last two years. Responses to the question were:

- 39% had used advice or support on a number of occasions;
- 35% had used advice or support at least once;
- 22% had not used advice or support; and
- 4% couldn't recall whether or not they had used advice or support.

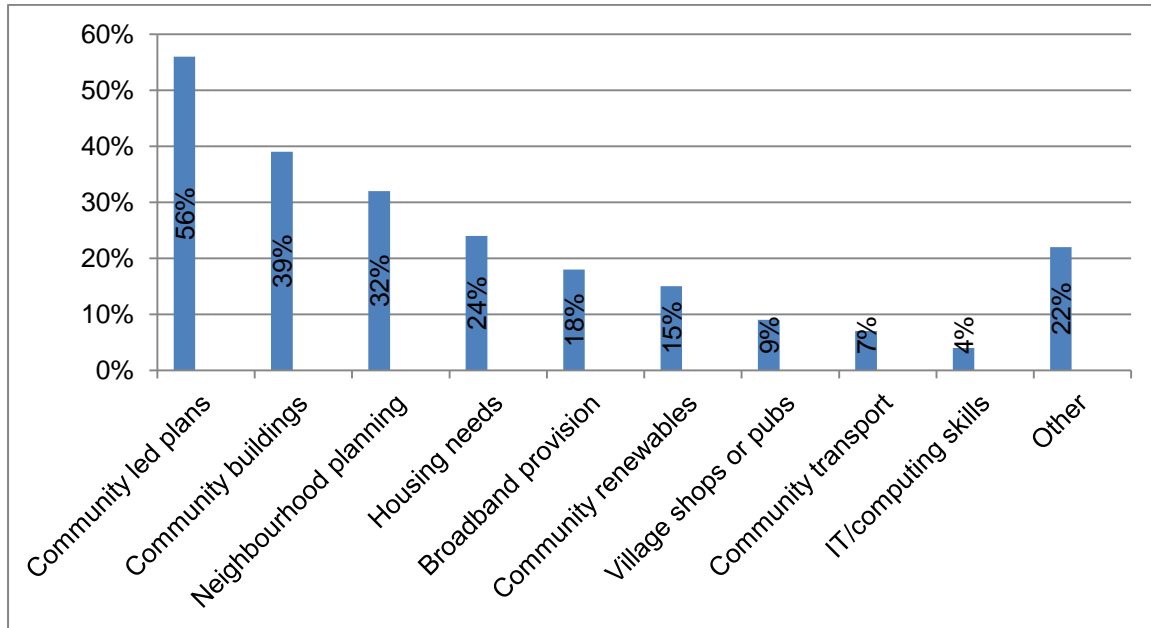
Policy issues supported: as the chart overleaf shows, the policy issues where RCAN advice or support had most frequently been used were community led plans, community buildings, neighbourhood planning and housing needs (including affordable housing).

The 'other' category (right hand bar on the chart) covers a spread of policy topics, including road safety, play areas and playing fields, energy saving schemes and youth services. A few cases were assistance with corporate concerns, such as finances and insurance.

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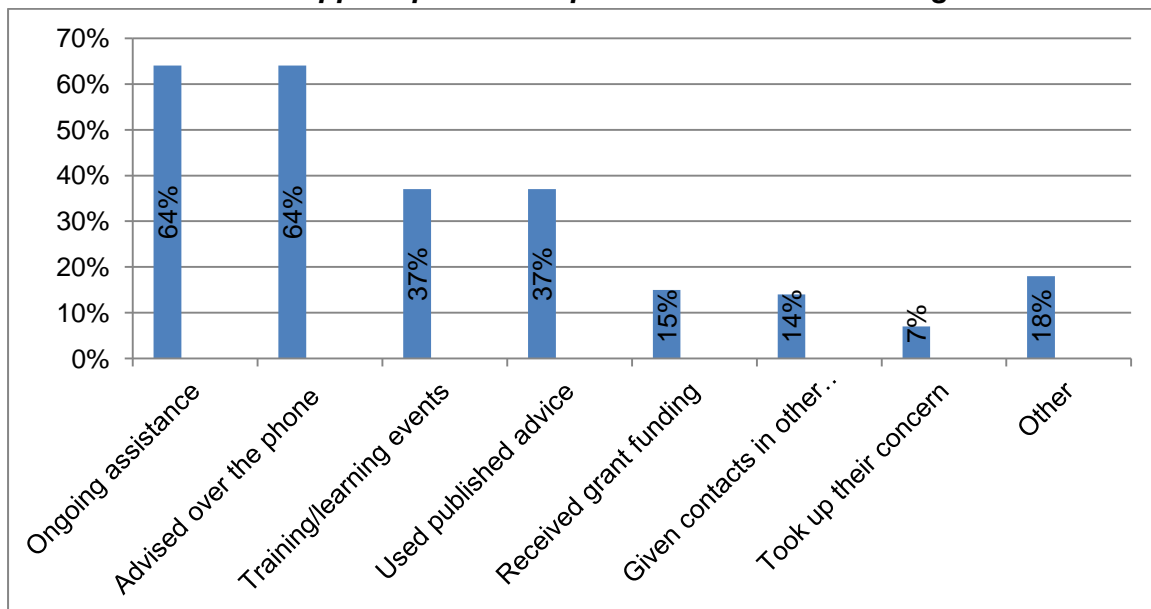
<sup>10</sup> For example, one local authority felt their RCAN member had not adapted quickly enough to changing policy priorities.

**Issues for advice or support: per cent of parish/town councils using RCAN assistance**



Format of support: the two most common formats for the assistance received were advice given over the phone and ongoing support from a member of RCAN staff. Attending learning or training events and using published RCAN documents were also popular, as the chart below shows.

**Format of advice or support: per cent of parish/town councils using RCAN assistance**



The 'other' category (right hand bar on the chart) indicates that the other significant format is where a RCAN member attends a parish or town council meeting to give advice.

Usefulness of support: the respondents were hugely positive about the "usefulness" of the advice or support received. 92% of responses were either that it was useful or very useful. Answers to the question were:

- 73% thought it was very useful;

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- 19% thought it was fairly useful;
- 5% thought it was not particularly useful;
- none thought it was unhelpful; and
- 3% couldn't recall how useful it had been.

Benefits of the support: the parish and town councils were asked what they had done differently as a result of the advice or support received from RCAN. The bulk of their responses fit within the headings in the box below.

The support:

- ✓ Enabled them to progress community led plans, often at a faster pace and/or to a higher standard;
- ✓ Enabled them to understand new initiatives, like neighbourhood plans, and so decide whether to pursue them;
- ✓ Helped them understand the (policy) options for meeting a local need;
- ✓ Gave them knowledge, skills and confidence to progress plans and projects ("*where do we begin?*");
- ✓ Enabled them to submit better funding applications (some noted as being successful);
- ✓ Enabled them to develop project (delivery) plans and to initiate local projects;
- ✓ Helped them to improve management arrangements for existing local facilities or services;
- ✓ Helped them to address complex legal issues or to comply with the law;
- ✓ Signposted them to other specialist places where they could find advice.

Impacts of the support: the parish and town councils were also asked what the impact or benefits were for their local residents or businesses. Around a third felt that it was too early to say, though many expected to see outcomes in due course. Where benefits were seen as already having accrued, most fitted under the headings in the box below.

As a result of the support:

- ✓ Local groups were now gaining access to funding opportunities;
- ✓ Residents were saving expenditure, either via measures which directly help them (e.g. oil bulk buy schemes) or because of cost savings against the council precept;
- ✓ People experienced better facilities and improved structures in community buildings;
- ✓ Communities saw affordable housing schemes progressed to meet local needs;
- ✓ Communities saw new services established and threatened services saved;
- ✓ Residents had more say in shaping local priorities and actions affecting their area e.g. through the planning system; and
- ✓ People gained from new jobs and extra volunteering opportunities created locally.

Alternate organisations: finally, the parish and town councils were asked about other organisations that they might have turned to for advice and support. Relatively few were aware of alternatives to their RCAN member or, at least, one that would have served their needs. Responses were:

- 61% were not aware of another local organisation providing that type of advice or support;
- 28% knew of another local organisation, but doubt its support would have been as relevant to their needs; and

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- 11% knew of another local organisation which they think would have been just as relevant to their needs.

Those who did think another organisation could have helped them almost all cited either their local authority or their County Association of Local Councils<sup>11</sup>.

## National stakeholders

The national stakeholders were contacted in relation to pillar three<sup>12</sup>. They were selected as people linked with three (of the four) priority themes. Some of the evidence gathered from these interviews was reported in the previous chapter, including the evidence of outcomes, so only a few additional points are noted here.

These stakeholders needed to work with networks, either as a source of evidence or to help drive policy implementation. RCAN's reach into rural areas was, again, cited consistently as a reason for working with ACRE and the network. One stakeholder added that most civil society sector networks have an urban focus, so engaging with a rural one is very important (*"they have helped ensure the dialogue was not as urban as it can be"*). The RCAN intelligence is seen as coming from practitioners, from across rural England and as being factually presented.

When asked about alternative networks, the stakeholders variously said that:

- They wanted to work with a number of networks to assist their policy work; but
- They could not think of another civil society network with as much rural reach;
- They could not think of another rural network providing such credible evidence.

All the national stakeholders hoped to continue working with ACRE and RCAN in future.

All three of these stakeholder groups can therefore be said to hold positive views about working with RCAN/ACRE over the last two years. The interviews and survey provide further useful evidence about the extent of outcomes being achieved.

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<sup>11</sup> These are, of course, the county associations that represent the parish and town councils' sector.

<sup>12</sup> Those selected for interview were in Defra RCPU, in DECC and in BDUK (DCMS).



## 6. Assessment of findings

The assessment of the mid-term evaluation findings is that:

- Activities and outcomes have been delivered across the three pillars and four priority themes, with the whole RCAN network contributing towards this.
- It is unlikely that most of the local influencing work would have happened without the Defra investment. There are no other sources of funding for local rural proofing.
- Defra's investment enabled many RCAN members to start working on broadband. It also helped some to stay engaged with or grow their work on fuel poverty and energy generation.
- It is relatively easier to point to tangible benefits resulting from the community support work (pillar two). Benefits from local influencing and intelligence gathering take longer to come about and can be harder to trace, but they may impact widely across rural areas.
- This Defra funding for RCAN/ACRE has represented good value for money and a good return on investment. The package of activities and outcomes comes from just £62,000 of investment (in 2012/13) in an average RCAN member.
- The degree of additionality has been high, especially for work under pillars one and three. Defra funding has also enabled RCAN members to add real value under pillar two.

Chapters 2 to 5 above set out the evidence base gathered through this mid-term evaluation. This chapter draws out some conclusions in relation to specific questions that were posed by Defra at the outset.

### Programme delivery

Programme management activity has essentially happened as planned. ACRE submitted all the intelligence and monitoring reports that were expected from it during 2011-13. They, in turn, appear to have received a full set of contributing reports from the rest of the RCAN network. The Keep In Touch group and the Governance Group have met more or less as intended. Managers feel that their meetings could sometimes be better planned to ensure they are as productive as possible.

In terms of activities, there is **solid and widespread evidence of RCAN/ACRE delivery against the Agreement**. A review of the two annual reports, reviews of the monitoring/intelligence reports and in-depth analysis of eight RCAN areas all indicate that the whole RCAN network has contributed to delivery across the pillars and priority themes. A substantial volume of activity took place as a result of the Defra investment and the funding

from other sources. Naturally the balance of that work varied, with some RCAN members doing more than others under certain priority themes.

The Agreement was set up to allow greater variation under pillar two, since some RCAN members do not deliver community support on particular topics. This may happen where there are other (non-RCAN) organisations delivering that support or where there are more pressing local priorities. Housing support<sup>13</sup>, transport support and broadband support appear to be the three services most often not dealt with by RCAN members. Nonetheless, all RCAN members undertook pillar one and pillar three activities in respect of those topics, albeit they may have been less well placed to do so and may have had to rely on intelligence gathered from partner organisations.

**The evaluation has found evidence of outcomes for pillar one and pillar two across the four priority themes.** Transport, services and facilities was where the largest number of outcomes was recorded. Those themes with the largest spend also tend to be those with the largest number of activities and outcomes. **Outcomes have been identified from the work of all 38 local RCAN members.** Analysis of pillar three, based on a sample approach, also found evidence of outcomes from within the three priority themes that were explored (see below).

### **Programme objectives**

It is possible to find evidence of progress against each of the three stated Defra objectives for this investment programme.

**Pillar one:** the stated objective is for RCAN members to become more able to support delivery of Government policy in rural areas. There has been very limited funding from other sources available for policy influencing work<sup>14</sup>. We can, therefore, say that **much of the pillar one work would not have taken place without Defra's investment.**

There is considerable evidence that Defra investment during 2011-13 helped RCAN members to engage locally on broadband. In 2011 many were not involved with this theme. RCAN members have been able to build their knowledge and skills, not least by learning from one another. Although from less of a standing start, a similar point could be made about work on fuel poverty: the Defra investment has helped some RCAN members to stay engaged with or to grow their engagement with this theme.

**Pillar two:** is intended to help rural communities become better able to take action for themselves. The evaluation has found widespread evidence that RCAN activity is assisting rural communities, as a result of Defra and other funding, to offer support on things such as: neighbourhood planning; meeting affordable housing needs; managing community buildings; establishing community-run services; taking up energy efficiency opportunities; and demonstrating demand for broadband.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, where a Rural Housing Enabler post is hosted by another local organisation.

<sup>14</sup> Exceptions are things like discreet research or engagement activity to inform policy development

As well as direct delivery of support services to rural communities, the evidence shows that RCAN members typically undertake activities which engender self-sufficiency, such as running training events, developing guidance tools and promoting local examples of good practice. The survey of parish/town councils gave positive findings about RCAN support assisting rural communities to address their needs and priorities. **Community action appears to be growing on various agendas where RCAN members have been active.**

**Pillar three:** the stated objective is intelligence which makes a demonstrable impact on national policy development. This evaluation has found examples of **RCAN intelligence being utilised by Defra RCPU to assist it in performing its rural champion function across Whitehall** – strengthening its evidence base, providing it with real rural examples and highlighting emerging issues that it could take up with other Departments/agencies. The evaluation also identified the value of rural intelligence to other Departments, either as a balance to their mainly urban intelligence or because they want to understand how best to deliver policies in rural locations. This sometimes informs or shapes their policies.

Any assessment should note **there are strong links between the three pillars and RCAN's ability to deliver on them.** Pillar two work with rural communities generates much of the evidence to underpin its pillar one work. It is what makes RCAN members a credible voice for rural communities. The flipside is that by having strategic contacts and an understanding of policies RCAN members gain much of their respect among rural communities. That knowledge of both local policy developments and rural community perspectives is, of course, the basis for providing pillar three intelligence to Defra.

### **Wider impacts**

An important question is what difference the activities and outcomes delivered through this investment have made for rural communities. The answer is that they are making a significant difference and will continue to do so.

**RCAN's delivery of advice and support has delivered tangible benefits to individual communities** in many places, such as: affordable homes; community-run shops or services; voluntary transport schemes; upgraded community buildings; warmer and more fuel efficient homes; fast broadband networks; and volunteering or even employment opportunities. It has also delivered softer benefits for communities such as: helping them to access funding streams; enabling them to engage with decision makers; and giving them more say about priorities for their area.

It is additionally clear that **rural communities will be benefitting where influencing and intelligence gathering activities have resulted in outcomes.** This happens where they lead to:

- Policy and strategy documents being better written to reflect rural community needs;
- Service delivery plans and local initiatives being designed or tailored to reach rural communities;
- Funding being made available to local RCAN members so they can support rural communities i.e. through pillar two.

Whilst it may be tempting to play down pillar one and three impacts because they seem less tangible, it should be noted that they may be felt widely across rural geographies e.g. whole local authority areas.

### Value for money

The delivery of the RCAN Agreement and the outcomes achieved represent good value for money.

Over the period 2011-13 the eight sample RCAN members received £1.07 million of Defra funding, about £0.9 million<sup>15</sup> of which they will have spent on pillar one and two work. During the same period they delivered 860 activities and achieved 108 outcomes under pillars one and two. This makes the cost to Defra of each recorded outcome around £8,300. **This is considered to represent a good return on investment.**

Our analysis shows that it is fair to assume that Defra funding paid for a large majority of the 54 pillar one outcomes. It was also a contributor to the 54 pillar two outcomes, where it was typically used alongside much larger sums coming from other funding sources.

The average (mean) Defra investment in a local RCAN member in financial year 2012/13 was a modest £62,000. For this each RCAN member delivered work under pillars one, two and three. The Defra funding was used alongside an average £217,000 of funding from other sources to buy a package of local influencing, community support and intelligence provision across the four priority themes. That Defra is able to secure **this scale of activity from such a relatively small pot of funding represents excellent value for money.**

Whilst it is important to note that value for money comparisons can be fraught with difficulties<sup>16</sup>, it is apparent that RCAN are delivering at least the same scale of outcomes as during the 2008-11 programme from a lower level of Defra investment.

The way in which RCAN members receive Defra funding, as a fairly flexible pot of grant-in-aid, adds to the impact of the investment. It enables RCAN members to use the money alongside other funding, to add value, and it generally shapes their wider rural work programme.

### Additionality

**There is a high degree of additionality achieved by the Defra investment.** Whilst other civil society networks are working with communities on similar issues, they do not have the particular rural focus of RCAN. That view was widely made by RCAN stakeholders.

Evidence from beneficiaries demonstrates that additionality is achieved by the Defra investment. National and local beneficiaries generally struggled to think of other organisations they could have turned to for advice, support or intelligence. Most either

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<sup>15</sup> We know that about 10% of local RCAN member spend typically goes on pillar three work.

<sup>16</sup> Partly because programmes deliver materially different things and partly because evaluations use different approaches to measure outcomes.

indicated they would have had to do more themselves to engage rural communities or they would have had to make the best of other networks. In both cases they were clear this would have entailed much more effort and given poorer (often less rural-specific) results.

Additionality for pillar one (local influencing) work is particularly high, since what RCAN does is fairly unique, supporting local rural proofing. Testimonials from local stakeholders that are recipients show that it would be missed, though there appears little appetite amongst the local statutory sector to fund this type of work. Without Defra investment it largely would not have happened.

The RCAN network has certain features which make it particularly well placed to undertake this type of work, including:

- The extent of its contacts within individual rural communities and rural-based organisations;
- An ability to work at both strategic and delivery levels, and to make linkages between the two;
- The breadth of its knowledge and experience across policy agendas of rural importance (not being sector-specific).

Additionality is also very high for pillar three. It may be that some organisations (perhaps some RCAN members) would be willing to submit intelligence at nil cost. However, that is likely to be variable (irregular), partial (not England-wide) and inconsistently gathered. It is also likely to arrive in raw format, instead of ready-analysed (as it is by ACRE).

The extent of additionality is lower for pillar two, given other organisations' greater willingness to pay for this kind of work. Defra funding is typically used alongside that from other sources (in an estimated ratio of roughly £1 to £6). However, the evidence is that Defra's money adds value, as it often goes towards things such as producing bids, scheme development, scheme promotion and deriving learning. These are not things other grant funders are typically willing to pay for. So Defra's investment appears to have been used in an enabling role, helping to facilitate wider activity. There are also examples, though it is not the norm, of Defra money directly leveraging funding from other sources and so bringing about local support schemes or initiatives. Additionality is likely to have been highest for broadband work where Defra has been the main funder.

### **Barriers and facilitators**

The evaluation has identified a number of external factors which are thought to have slowed or assisted the ability of the RCAN network to deliver under this Agreement.

The most **commonly cited barriers** to delivery and the achievement of outcomes were:

*Organisational change:* 2011, when this programme began, was a time of considerable organisational turbulence. Regional structures e.g. Regional Development Agencies and Government Offices, were being wound up. They had been stakeholders for RCAN members and the network had its own regional bodies to help it engage at that tier. Other changes affected the local level, where Local Area Agreements and most Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) were ended. RCAN members sometimes found LSPs and their sub-

groups burdensome, but they also offered a table around which to meet formally with other strategic players. Change issues hanging over from local government reorganisation (in 2009) were still noted. These changes have affected pillar one work in particular;

*Funding availability:* local authority budgets have been reducing significantly during the period in question. Many have shrunk their funding for civil society sector organisations, such as RCAN members. There has also been a continuing shift in local authority funding towards short-term service level agreements, geared to very specific items of service delivery and with no or little flexibility. Cutbacks are also seen as meaning that local authority officers no longer have much time to engage with partners like RCAN or perhaps the appetite to do so. This has affected pillar two work in particular;

*Difficult working relationships:* this affects certain RCAN members much more than others. However, some reported unproductive or patchy relationships with local stakeholders. Where this refers to an organisation like the County or Unitary Council it can obviously have a significant impact. More widespread were reports of problems trying to engage with Local Enterprise Partnerships, who it is thought did not see civil society sector organisations or did not view rural areas as central to their objectives;

*National policy changes:* though not a barrier, per se, some RCAN members appear to have found changes in policy such as the advent of *neighbourhood planning* and the recent focus on *economic growth* a challenge. In the case of the former, its relationship with traditional community led planning (parish plans, village design statements, etc), which have been a stock-in-trade for the network, has meant thinking through and adapting the support they offer to communities. RCAN now has to think how its activities map onto the Government's economic growth agenda.

The most **commonly cited facilitators** to delivery and the achievement of outcomes were:

*New partnering opportunities:* whilst organisational turbulence may have led to the end of some partner organisations it created other opportunities. One fruitful policy area has been that around health and social care, where RCAN members have variously grown their engagement with Clinical Commissioning Groups, Healthwatch bodies and Health & Wellbeing Boards/sub-groups. Local authority partnerships to oversee Local Broadband Plans have been another common target;

*New policy initiatives:* where new Government initiatives relate to one of the priority themes they create opportunities for RCAN members. The examples identified appear to be most commonly associated with fuel poverty and energy generation, where there has been a significant number (some RCAN members may say a confusing number) of new initiatives and measures introduced;

*Localism:* the Localism Act came onto the statute in 2011. Although many of the specific measures it introduced have yet to make a significant impact (neighbourhood planning being an exception, since it already has), it has created an expectation around greater community action and self-help which some RCAN members mentioned. There is growing demand for advice and support. RCAN members have also noted a growth in asset transfer and service delegation schemes (no doubt equally as a result of local authority cutbacks);

*Building on success:* RCAN has demonstrated an ability to learn from and roll out community-based models which it has pioneered and where they have proved successful. Two obvious examples are Oil Bulk Buy schemes, initially tried in Oxfordshire, and the Village Agents scheme, initially tried in Gloucestershire. Evidence from the monitoring reports points strongly to them growing in scale and geography.

There are lessons which should be drawn from this assessment and these are discussed in the two chapters which follow.



## 7. Delivery lessons

Lessons are identified to:

- Help RCAN members engage more easily with local broadband partners.
- Clarify the economic growth role of RCAN members, including engagement with LEPs.
- Use the Defra investment more flexibly to reflect differing local circumstances.
- Engage other Whitehall Departments with the resources the expert Reference Groups provide.
- Top-up some intelligence gathering from other specialist organisations and networks related to the priority themes.

There are a number of lessons which can be drawn from the evidence and analysis produced during this mid-term evaluation. This chapter covers those which relate to the delivery of the programme.

### Broadband work

For many RCAN members work on broadband was new territory in 2011, which was instigated by the Agreement. They have been on a steep learning curve to engage with a relatively complex topic, build appropriate partnerships and find the role they could best play. In good part, RCAN members grew their technical knowledge of broadband issues by learning from each other and with assistance from ACRE. This is an interesting illustration of the ability of the Agreement to address an issue of rapidly growing concern for rural communities.

In many areas RCAN members have struggled to find funding from other sources or in some cases to engage the key local players on this theme. Yet the role that RCAN can play in this policy area is important as more superfast broadband networks get delivered (through Local Broadband Plans). The network should therefore **share and learn lessons from places where its members have been able to engage successfully on this theme**. Going forward the role RCAN plays might adapt, with the focus being on broadband take-up among rural communities and businesses, and perhaps helping to address IT skills among certain groups.

### Economic growth

In 2012/13 Defra is looking to the RCAN network to contribute to the rural economic growth agenda. This has effectively become a new and high priority theme under the Agreement.



RCAN members have already been active on this topic as examples in the box indicate. There is a learning note published alongside this report which details some examples.

Economic growth activities of RCAN members during 2011-13:

- Sitting on LEADER Local Action Groups;
- Sitting on groups established by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs);
- Chairing a countywide, voluntary sector, social enterprise network;
- Supporting individual communities to set-up social enterprises e.g. community-run shops and pubs;
- Pressing for policies in Local Development Plans that assist rural economic activity;
- Managing a county school for social entrepreneurs<sup>17</sup>.

RCAN members have worked hard to gain traction with LEPs. The range of engagement is evident from an increasing number of LEP references in the monitoring reports (comparing 2012/13 with 2011/12). Despite their efforts many RCAN members have found LEP engagement difficult to achieve. This was said to be a result of LEPs focussing on mainstream business growth and not recognising the contribution of the civil society sector or LEPs seeing rural areas as peripheral to their interests. RCAN should **share and learn from areas where LEP engagement has succeeded**, helping it to refine the RCAN 'offer' to them.

Interviewed RCAN members noted that they also contributed to economic growth through work under other priority themes. Transport and housing concerns were cited as key to successful economies. One RCAN member was persuasive in arguing that whilst it was not equipped to support mainstream rural businesses, what it could do was address related issues, such as access to employment e.g. through transport or Wheels to Work schemes, and around workforce skills.

It is reasonable to ask in what sense(s) the RCAN network is well placed to deliver Defra's aspirations on the rural economic growth agenda. Defra needs to be realistic about its expectations. Defra and ACRE (with input from the wider network) should continue to discuss and **agree the sorts of things that can be delivered within the confines of this Agreement**, and given RCAN skills and experience.

### Flexibility of funding

The fact that the Defra funding comes with a fair degree of flexibility, as to its use, is greatly valued by the RCAN network. It is also beneficial for Defra, since it enables RCAN members to seek out and pursue opportunities and to add value. Defra funding can be used to support activities which are cross-cutting, such as engaging with local partnerships which have strategic remits across policy agendas or Defra priority themes.

This has implications for the balance of work across the different priority themes. Needs vary from one RCAN area to another, as do organisational set-ups. In some RCAN areas the rural dimension to a priority theme may be largely covered through the work of other organisations and it would be wasteful for the RCAN member to prioritise that issue as well.

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<sup>17</sup> This example did not use Defra money and was not solely rural.

There is already variation in the balance of work that RCAN members undertake, but with a reducing Defra budget line that could be allowed to go one step further. RCAN members could **use the priority themes as a framework within which they prioritise according to local circumstances** and intervening where they judge there to be the best chance of achieving impact.

### Reference groups

Some expert Reference Groups have proved more useful than others, although those interviewed for this evaluation did find them to be productive. They offer an opportunity to engage directly with some local RCAN members, to explore issues of interest in greater detail and to discuss ways forward. In short, they are a more interactive form of engagement with RCAN than the intelligence reports.

Among the better examples of pillar three outcomes were those where a relevant officer from another Department or agency had joined a Reference Group meeting for a three-way discussion with Defra RCPU and ACRE/RCAN. It will not always be appropriate, but there appears merit in adopting the approach more frequently, **offering the Reference Group meetings as a means for Departments to gain a direct line to rural practitioners**. Indeed, it could prove cost-effective, being simpler to administer than seeking 'special request' reports from the RCAN network.

### Other civil society networks

RCAN is not the only network that offers a connection to communities and stakeholders in rural areas, so it is reasonable for Defra to ask whether it is using the most appropriate and cost-effective one. Criteria for assessing alternatives could include:

- Do their members have full, or at least wide, coverage of rural England?
- Do their members have a sound and a broad understanding of rural issues?
- Do their members have the ability to work at grass roots level, but also to make a valid strategic contribution at local and sub-regional level? and assuming Defra does not wish to take this role on itself
- Do they have a national body willing to manage an Agreement and to lead on the intelligence flows?

Additional networks, most of which deliver in rural and urban areas, include:

- Locality: a national membership body supporting development trusts, community enterprises and community hub organisations;
- NAVCA: the national representative body for the network of district/borough or county-based CVSs (some of which are RCAN members);
- NCVO: a broad based representative and support organisation for those in the community and voluntary sectors;
- National Association of Local Councils: along with the county associations (CALCs), it represents the parish and town councils' sector;
- Rural Services Network: a local authority interest grouping (called Sparse) plus a networking and influencing body for other service providers (called RSP);
- Rural and Farming Networks: local groupings of representatives from the farming, food and rural affairs sectors which meet with Defra;

## Brian Wilson Associates

- Campaign to Protect Rural England: an individual membership body, with a volunteer-based county structure, engaged mainly with land use planning issues;
- Plunkett Foundation: supporting practically the development of community-owned shops, services and enterprises in rural areas;
- Action for Market Towns: a membership organisation which represents small town interests and supports practice for their regeneration.

Defra already receives some intelligence from these networks on an ad hoc basis and sometimes from specialist networks or bodies under particular priority themes, such as the Community Transport Association and the Rural Housing Advisory Group<sup>18</sup>.

However, none of the other networks which represent the civil society sector can meet all four of the criteria listed above. Defra could, though, continue to top-up its intelligence gathering from some of them. In particular, the **‘special question’ reports could in future be sent to appropriate specialist networks** e.g. on transport or housing, as well as going to RCAN.

<b>Lesson</b>	<b>For</b>
Lessons should be shared and learnt from successful examples of RCAN broadband work, not least to consider future RCAN roles.	ACRE and RCAN
Lessons should be shared and learnt from RCAN members that have succeeded in engaging with LEPs.	ACRE and RCAN
LEPs should consider the contribution RCAN members can make. Defra should use its LEP engagement to promote this.	Defra and LEPs
Expectations of the RCAN network in terms of its contribution to the rural economic growth agenda should continue to be discussed and clarified.	Defra and ACRE
The priority themes could be used as a framework within which RCAN members prioritise locally.	Defra
Other Government Departments (e.g. DCLG, DECC) should be invited to expert Reference Group meetings where relevant.	Defra
Other networks provide intelligence to Defra on specific topics and this could be expanded to supplement intelligence from RCAN further.	Defra
Special question intelligence reports could usefully be sent out to relevant specialist networks, as well as to RCAN members.	Defra

<sup>18</sup> Set up and co-ordinated by the Homes & Communities Agency.

## 8. Management lessons

Lessons are identified to:

- Improve the utility of RCAN intelligence provision to Defra and other Departments.
- Ensure the RCAN network gains some feedback about the use of its intelligence.
- Improve the recording of outcomes, including in the annual monitoring report to Defra.
- Assist the adoption of more financially sustainable models from learning within the network.
- Consider using some of the Defra funding to support work on building more financially sustainable models.

Defra has to consider the details of the fourth year of the Agreement (2014/15) and will no doubt wish to consider the position from 2015 onwards. This chapter, therefore, draws some further lessons relating to the management of the Agreement.

### Providing intelligence

It is probably fair to say all parties now consider that the reporting process was over-engineered in 2011/12. It is clear, having reviewed just 8 (out of 38) sets of detailed monitoring reports, that ACRE had a formidable task to manage and summarise that volume of information. The process was streamlined in 2012/13, by reducing the frequency of the regular reports and by focusing them around fewer key messages.

These changes to intelligence reports have improved its utility, but there remains scope to do more. This is an opportunity which one RCAN interviewee summed up as providing “more intelligence and less information”. The aim would be to: clarify what is being sought from local RCAN members; simplify the collation and synthesis task for ACRE; and deliver more policy-targeted messages to Defra. Reports may be more useful to Defra and other Departments if the main focus was the implementation in rural areas of specified national policies and initiatives. As well as Defra RCPU selecting those policies, other Departments could be encouraged to suggest where they want rural intelligence. The two key questions might then be: are there rural issues arising; and are there examples of good rural practice? This would perform a local rural proofing role as policies get delivered. That said, it would seem sensible to retain a box on the monitoring form for RCAN members to raise ‘other issues’ that may be off Defra’s radar.

ACRE has already started to take a hard look at the format of the intelligence it provides. **It would be helpful if ACRE and Defra jointly agreed a revised format to meet their needs.**

## Feedback to RCAN

Defra discontinued its feedback reports at the end of 2012/13 as part of the changes made to streamline the management overhead of the Agreement. Although that overall ambition is commendable, **it would be useful if there was a 'low effort' feedback mechanism put in place**. RCAN members do not generally know how their intelligence is used or whether it is proving useful. This can be rather dispiriting: RCAN members are more likely to engage positively with the process and to learn what makes useful intelligence if they have some feedback. Feedback could happen – like the intelligence reports – twice yearly and simply be a short written statement from the RCPU policy lead(s) for each priority theme.

## Recording of outcomes

RCAN members are often good at reporting on activities, but less good at reporting on outcomes. This is not a criticism unique to the RCAN network. However, it is under-selling the network to Defra and other funders as a result: they want to know what difference their investment makes. It is evident from the monitoring information reviewed that some RCAN members are better than others at recording outcomes e.g. see Kent RCC. Some that were interviewed were aware that it would help if outcomes were better measured and recorded. Indeed, one or two had specific projects in hand to explore this. The wider RCAN network should learn from these projects. This would enable RCAN members to **provide more outcome-focused information for inclusion in the annual monitoring report** that ACRE submits to Defra.

It has not been possible in this report to present information about outcomes in the form of cost-benefit ratios. That information simply does not exist at present. However, in some cases (largely pillar two work) it should be possible to take this kind of approach, showing what measurable outcomes have been delivered with what level of expenditure. It appears that a few RCAN members (e.g. Buckinghamshire, Essex) have already done this or something similar for their oil bulk buying schemes.

This work could make use of Social Return on Investment (SROI) methods, so that the range of outcomes being delivered by RCAN work are adequately captured. It would be useful if some such information were in place for an ex post evaluation of the programme.

## Sustainable funding approaches

The funding climate for RCAN members has been a fairly tough one, as it has for the civil society sector more generally. Local authorities have typically reduced their funding for non-statutory services and projects. It could be said that the RCAN network, as a totality, has done well or has been quite resourceful in the circumstances, by managing to maintain the funding level it receives from other (non-Defra) sources. Central Government budgets are equally under considerable pressure until 2015, at least, and the Defra investment through this Agreement has reduced from £3.2 million in 2011/12 to around £2.5 million in 2013/14. So it is right RCAN members should re-double their efforts to seek out alternative or replacement funding sources<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> As noted elsewhere, these are likely to be almost entirely for pillar two work.

There is widespread action across the RCAN network to find new income streams, not least where charges or fees are being introduced to cover the cost of support services offered to communities and groups. Further evidence of adaptation is that some RCAN members accessed Transforming Local Infrastructure funding from the Cabinet Office in 2012, to develop their capacity and partnership working – an impressive five successful bids were RCAN-led. So the RCAN model is adapting.

*Service charges:* most of the visited RCAN members have started to charge communities and groups for certain of their support services. However, these schemes were fairly new or still under development, so their sustainability was hard to assess. Community Action Hampshire switched its village halls advisory service to an annual subscription basis in 2012. A membership fee allows a village hall committee to access one-to-one support. Cambridgeshire ACRE similarly started charging for its village halls advisory service from July 2013, with a basic membership fee which gives access to online or telephone-based support and an hourly charge-out rate for one-to-one support.

*Asset management:* Cambridgeshire ACRE was invited to take over management of a struggling outdoor leisure centre by the district council which owned it. After two years the centre's fortunes have been turned around – it was saved from closure and is now in a position to grow. The RCAN member found that it had many of the core skills required, such as governance, HR and financial planning. This outdoor centre now generates valuable income.

*Commission:* some of the oil bulk buying schemes to tackle fuel poverty which are managed by RCAN members are based on a model whereby they receive a commission or some income. This presumably covers their management overheads, at least, making the schemes financially self sufficient and so independent of external grant funding.

*Diversifying funding sources:* Shropshire Rural Community Council has developed a five year strategy to diversify its income, so that it is in a more financially sustainable position. This has various strands to it, including a charging structure for community groups and renting out meeting rooms and a training suite. It also ran a local community funding campaign which raised donations. A professional funding skills organisation was recruited to assist, including building its capacity for submitting bid proposals.

*Shared services:* various options are under consideration to streamline and reduce the cost of back-office functions. These include the possibility of mergers with other infrastructure bodies in the same geographic area and a merger between two neighbouring RCAN members. Another shared service possibility is RCAN members in a region operating a joint (i.e. region-wide) village halls advisory service.

There is undoubtedly a great deal that RCAN members across **the network can learn from such innovations** and some further information to assist this process is published in a separate learning note. Indeed, Defra and ACRE could consider using some pillar two **funding to support efforts that will put RCAN support and advice services for rural communities on a more sustainable financial footing**. It could, for example, go towards developmental work, piloting and learning from income generating models.

<b>Lesson</b>	<b>For</b>
Work to review the format of intelligence reports should be completed to improve their utility for Defra and others.	Defra and ACRE
A light touch mechanism should provide the RCAN network with feedback about the use of its intelligence.	Defra
The network should improve its recording of outcomes, learning from projects by some RCAN members.	RCAN
The annual reports to Defra should be more focused on reporting outcomes.	ACRE
There is value in systematically learning from current RCAN member innovations to grow financial sustainability.	ACRE and RCAN
Some Defra funding could (under pillar two) go towards developmental work aimed at building financial sustainability.	Defra and ACRE



## 9. Concluding comments

One of the most striking features of RCAN is the extent of variation amongst local members, including their organisational structure and size of operation. In many ways this should be seen as a strength reflecting local circumstances. It also means it can be hard to generalise in reaching conclusions about the network and it means that a national funder i.e. Defra, must accept some differentiation in the approach to delivery of its investment.

Many RCAN members operate in mixed urban-rural counties where there may be a particular need to maintain the rural voice and to rural proof policy making. Some work in more obviously rural counties where local authorities and other organisations are more attuned to rural thinking, so the RCAN member role may be as much about raising the local community perspective. A further reason for such variation is that some RCAN members are also VCS bodies. This may well be the larger or more resourced part of their operation and may mean that they work as much in urban as in rural areas. These RCAN members could be seen as more generic infrastructure organisations which have a rural team.

The Defra Agreement and investment are important to the RCAN network and especially to those RCAN members with the least funding coming in from other sources. It also helps underpin the role of ACRE as network co-ordinator, providing it with a degree of authority to engage nationally, including at Whitehall level, as an adviser on policy impacts in rural communities. Further, it helps to maintain the Network as a grouping with some common priorities and some commonality of approach across rural England.

The Agreement helps to sustain and gives Defra a formal link with a local network of rural proofing agents who can provide a rural voice or assist rural communities and bring together grass roots rural intelligence. It contributes to Defra RCPU's rural proofing work at a national level, its wish to see rural proofing take root at a local level and its ambition for active rural communities able to address more of their own needs.

In terms of pillars one and three in particular, there is little evidence of other networks (than RCAN) currently performing those roles and little evidence that anyone else (than Defra) would be willing to pay for them. Stakeholders view the influencing work of RCAN positively and often turn to it for advice, yet the reality is they are unlikely to draw on hard pressed budgets to fund something i.e. rural proofing, that is 'good to do' but not a mandatory requirement and not tangible front line delivery.

Evidence that has been gathered for and assessed through this mid-term evaluation is intended to help Defra consider the effectiveness of its Agreement during 2011-13. The findings should be seen as positive, since they show that:

- The network has made good progress in delivering against the Defra agreement and a considerable volume of activity has been generated;
- Outcomes have been recorded that span the pillars and priority themes. All of the RCAN members have contributed outcomes;
- Those outcomes are considered to represent good value for money and a high return on Defra's investment; and



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- The level of additionality from this investment has been high, especially in the case of pillars one and three.

Some factors which could be taken into account when thinking about the future of the programme are:

- The evaluation has not found evidence to question the assumption that the three current pillars are appropriate and relevant for this type of public investment;
- However, there is scope to support learning and development work, to move RCAN members towards more sustainable funding models;
- The relative flexibility of the approach that Defra has taken to its Agreement has proved beneficial for all the parties;
- The RCAN network appears to have adapted well to support new or emerging Government policy priorities;
- However, it is easier to support topics where they relate to RCAN members' existing local priorities and networks. They need more help to engage where their networks are weaker; and
- The structure of the ACRE/RCAN network has been a key element in what made it deliver successfully for Defra, so supporting that structure is itself useful.