Introduction
The ACRE network consists of 38 County level rural development charities and their national association: Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). Members of the network have assisted rural communities to manage and adapt to change for over 80 years especially over issues such as affordable housing, access to local services, health & wellbeing and rural isolation.

ACRE’s evidence is being submitted on the behalf of the whole ACRE network and therefore encompasses both a national viewpoint on how a rural dimension to public policy has been addressed since the Act came into force and also a more local one, derived from 38 rural development charities experience on how this has been rolled out to local government and government’s more local agencies.

This submission responds only to Question 9 of the Select Committee call for evidence, as it was felt that this question has most relevance to the rural communities that the ACRE network support and represent in national debate. Due to the unique make-up of rural communities, in terms of demographic, industry, access to services and development we feel that it is imperative that the Committee considers a rural perspective when answering the question about communities and groups feeling ‘left behind’.

Question 9. Why do so many communities and groups feel ‘left behind’?

Opinion polls and other qualitative and anecdotal evidence suggest that the prevalence of a sense of being ‘left behind’ is not just a phenomenon of relatively deprived urban areas but is also very common amongst parts of the rural community. It may be possible to identify specific urban locations where this view is concentrated, in rural areas it is more diffuse and affects particular sections of the population in most rural communities.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, and the fiscal / public expenditure action that has been taken as a result, rural areas have seen dramatic economies being made in public services of all kinds. These have included health services, youth provision, library services, public transport etc. In all these services the tendency of those managing diminishing budgets has been to look at unit costs of delivery to individuals and families and seek to reduce services where either the unit cost is highest or the least visibly damaging cuts can be made. For public agencies that serve rural areas as well as urban ones, this has often meant cutting rural services first. For those living in rural areas it is not a matter of perceiving themselves as being left behind, they are being left behind and left out.

Government has seen community activity and volunteering as a means of ensuring that preventative services can be retained whilst budgets are protected for acute and emergency response services. This is evident across many areas of public service from the NHS to the Police Service. Rural communities are rightly proud of their tradition of resilience and self-sufficiency. Many feel this tradition has been abused and resources have been wasted in national initiatives where the bulk of the available money has not been used to support local activity but instead to build up new agencies and activity within local government departments. Many volunteers feel de-motivated by a tendency to be ‘sucked-into’ the public sector and their highly risk averse procedures. This tendency for ‘top-down’ direction from the public sector results in de-motivation
of volunteers and is true across many areas, from health and wellbeing services to neighbourhood planning.

The Committee asks the question of how barriers to active citizenship can be overcome. In rural areas communities have always looked to themselves to provide some of those services and facilities that the state provides in urban areas. They understand that this is part of what it is to live in a rural area. What they find hard to understand is why the institutions of the state are so reluctant to understand, and take account of, the realities for people living in rural areas. The most frequent anxieties the ACREnetwork hear expressed by rural people when it comes to getting involved in their community are:

- excessive risk aversion and its resulting paperwork within the public sector;
- systems that rely on fast broadband that they either cannot get or cannot afford;
- national initiatives that are clearly designed only for major centres of population;
- complex and expensive consultations over urban initiatives and a reluctance to listen to how decisions will impact rural people in their communities;
- being treated as ‘cattle fodder’ for national citizenship initiatives that do not understand the commitment that individuals already make to their communities in rural areas.

This submission has been written by Jeremy Leggett on behalf of ACREnetwork

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