



# Revitalising Rural



Realising the Vision

## PARISH COUNCILS AND RURAL COMMUNITY ACTION





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Realising the Vision

## The Rural Services Network

We are a membership organisation and we work on your behalf for rural communities.

The RSN is the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation.

Our membership comprises 116 rural local authorities plus over 210 other rural service providers and interest groups including Rural Housing Associations, Healthcare Trusts and Charities. We also have over 200 larger Parish or Town Councils in the Rural Market Town Group.

You can find out more about the RSN at our website [www.rsnonline.org.uk](http://www.rsnonline.org.uk).

We always welcome new members and if you are interested in joining the RSN, click here for more information. [Join the RSN!](#)

## Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision is a campaign run by the RSN, which sets out a number of policy asks in 14 key subject areas to help support rural areas to achieve their full potential, and to 'level-up' areas of historical underinvestment.



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Realising the Vision

## PARISH COUNCILS AND RURAL COMMUNITY ACTION



### Why it matters

Parish and Town Councils form the most local tier of governance and are present across the great majority of rural England. As such, they help represent the views and needs of rural communities (alongside principal local authority Councillors and MPs).

Parish and Town Councils frequently manage local services, such as open spaces, allotments, leisure facilities and litter bins, contributing to rural wellbeing and quality of life. Larger Town Councils tend to manage a wider range of services and assets.

Community action equally plays a critical role, not least where it plugs local gaps in provision by running projects, initiatives and services that address local needs. These typically are needs unlikely to be met either by the statutory or private sectors.

Action at the community level often delivers support to tackle isolation and loneliness among older or more vulnerable residents in rural areas. This can include informal neighbourliness and more organised befriending or good neighbour schemes.

Community based and charitable action creates a range of volunteering opportunities for rural residents, providing many who take part with satisfaction, new skills, and new networks.

## The national policy context

Key elements of national policy include:

- Parish and Town Councils – most of rural England is parished and this usually means having a Parish or Town Council.<sup>1</sup> A key source of income, used by most, is to levy a precept which is collected through household Council Tax bills by District or Unitary Councils. Parish and Town Councils have gained additional powers in the last decade. Their discretionary powers were enhanced by a General Power of Competence, giving parishes which meet certain criteria broad scope to manage services, assets and other initiatives.<sup>2</sup> They may also use the Community Right to Challenge (as may community groups) to request their principal local authority formally considers delegating delivery of services to them (on a procured basis).
- Volunteering – rural action by volunteers happens in a myriad of ways, some of it organised by charities, trusts and other not-for-profit organisations, and some of it taking place by unincorporated groups. Government has sought to encourage volunteering by funding various support organisations and initiatives, including the National Citizen Service for 16 to 17 year olds and the <https://do-it.org/> website (which advertises volunteering opportunities).
- Community-run services – a growing number of community groups have taken on and managed local services or assets, such as village shops and pubs. These typically rely on volunteers to reduce operating costs and maintain viability. Organisations assisting rural community groups with such initiatives include the Plunkett Foundation and Pub is the Hub (see also chapter on Sustaining Village Schools and Local Assets). Communities now have a legislative right to register assets, such as a pub, as an Asset of Community Value, providing them with an opportunity to bid for that asset if it comes up for sale.

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<sup>1</sup> In law all are 'Parish Councils', though some use names such as Town, Community or Neighbourhood Council.

<sup>2</sup> This Power applies to Parish Councils with a CiLCA qualified Clerk and with two-thirds of councillors elected.



- Community Ownership Fund – in March 2021 Government announced that up to £250,000 of match-funding would be available for some communities wanting to buy or take over a local asset which is otherwise at risk of being lost, such as a pub, theatre or sports club. A fund prospectus with more details will be published and a first bidding round is due to commence in June 2021.
- Infrastructure bodies – various bodies and networks offer support to community groups, in the form of guidance, advice, networking and training opportunities. They include the ACRE Network, with its 38 county-based organisations, which have a particular focus on support for rural groups. Such support helps to build the capacity and effectiveness of community groups in areas such as governance, finance, managing volunteers and project delivery.

## The rural dimension

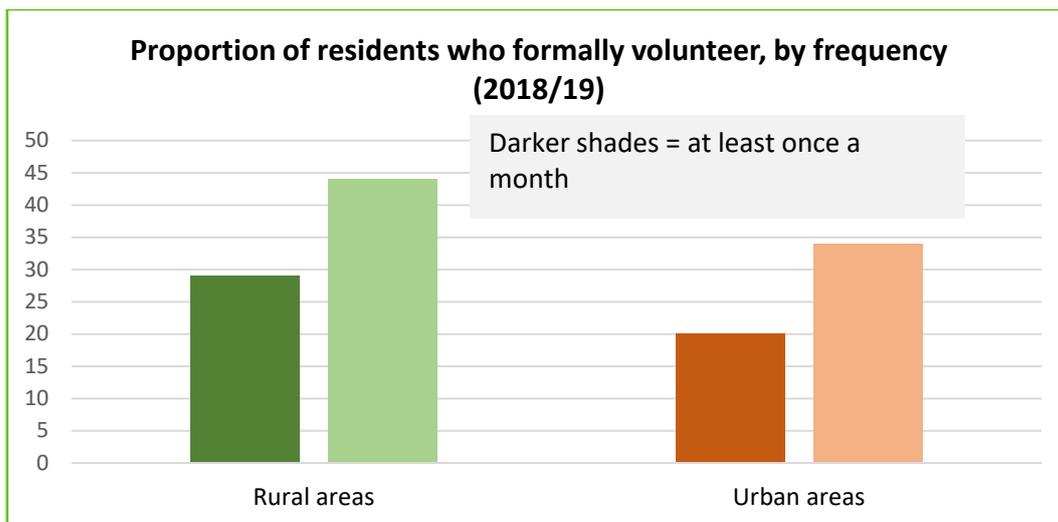
According to the National Association of Local Councils, which represents the Parish and Town Councils sector:<sup>3</sup>

- There are roughly 10,000 Parish and Town Councils active in England, mostly in rural areas;
- Parish populations range from less than 100 to well in excess of 50,000 (and therefore urban);
- Between them these Councils have around 120,000 serving Councillors;
- They raised an average precept from a band D property of just over £64 (2017/18).

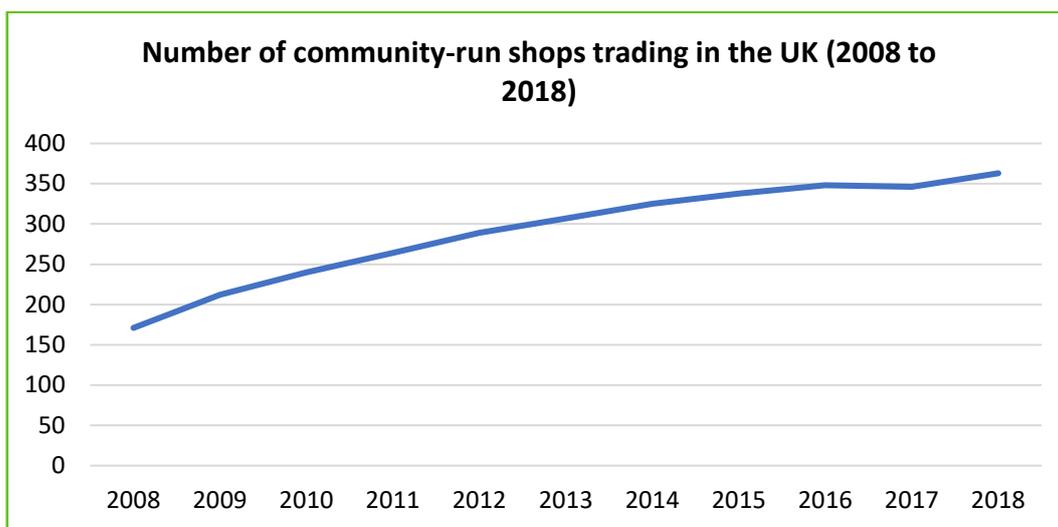
Those living in rural areas are more likely to volunteer than those living in urban areas. Statistics which measure formal volunteering (through clubs and other organisations), indicate that this remains true both for regular and occasional volunteers.<sup>4</sup> Towards half of all rural residents (44%) formally volunteered over the space of a year. However, figures for informal volunteering are almost identical in rural and urban areas.

<sup>3</sup> *All About Local Councils*, National Association of Local Councils (2018).

<sup>4</sup> *Community Life Survey 2018-19*, Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2019).



The number of community-run shops that are trading in the UK has increased from 171 in 2008 to 363 in 2018. This represents a 112% growth over the decade.<sup>5</sup> The great majority of these shops are found in rural locations.

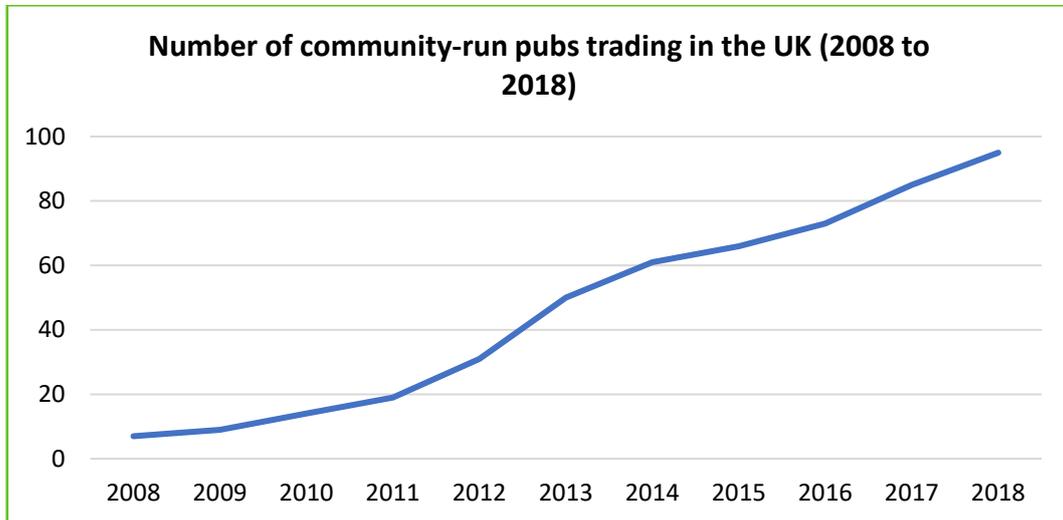


Those community-run shops which opened during 2018 raised start-up funding from four sources:

- 43% from grants awarded by grant giving bodies;
- 42% from shares bought by their local communities;
- 9% from loans or mortgages; and
- 6% from donations and other fund-raising activity.

<sup>5</sup> *Community Shops: A Better form of Business*, Plunkett Foundation (2019).

The number of community-run pubs that are trading in the UK has increased from 7 in 2008 to 95 in 2018. This represents a more-than twelvefold growth over the decade.<sup>6</sup>



Analysis has shown that in 82% of cases the local community owns the pub building and in the remaining cases it leases the pub building.

## Policy solutions

Community action has been a core component of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions, supporting many older and vulnerable rural residents at a particularly difficult time. Many long-standing volunteers had to shield themselves and withdraw from volunteering activities, but equally, new younger volunteers have often come forward.

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<sup>6</sup> *Community Pubs: A Better form of Business*, Plunkett Foundation (2019).



## Parish Councils and Rural Community Action

### Specific policy asks

**Parish and Town Councils:** Government should instigate a review of eligibility to use the General Power of Competence, to see if more Councils could be equipped to respond to any future emergencies providing support to individual residents. Government should also remove its threat to impose referenda on Parish and Town Councils where they increase their annual Council Tax precept above a given level. It is unrealistic to expect these Councils to grow their roles, whilst at the same time tying their hands financially.

**Infrastructure support:** Government should increase the level of financial support it provides to infrastructure bodies, so they can help local rural community and voluntary sector groups to bounce back from the difficult period they have experienced in 2020. Many have faced extra costs and have lost income. Bodies such as the ACRE Network support such groups to recruit and train volunteers, to raise or bid for funding, to grow their management skills and to develop credible plans.

**Good neighbour schemes:** with increased funding from Government, support should be provided to encourage more parish councils and rural communities to develop good neighbour or befriending schemes, which support the wellbeing of vulnerable residents and which address loneliness or isolation. These volunteer-based schemes have a track record of working well in rural settings and the support they offer takes pressure off statutory services including the NHS.

**Locally run services:** guidance and access to funding is needed to help communities meet local needs and fill gaps in service provision. One approach which could be supported is the Single Point of Contact (SPoC), where an organisation manages the process of commissioning local services from the VCS sector on behalf of a commissioning authority. Having announced the Community Ownership Fund, Government should now review the Community Right to Buy, finding a way to strengthen the hand of communities that register an interest in buying a local asset. Too few such assets transfer to communities.

*Since the RSN made its ask about the need for community funding to support locally-run services, the Government has announced the creation of the Community Ownership Fund.*

*Related policy asks also appear in the chapter Rural Schools and Community Facilities, which includes support for community-run shops and the like.*