

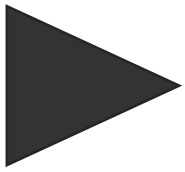
Supporting rural communities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

Impact Report 2024 - 2025



Our vision: “Rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough where people flourish, connections grow and everyone can thrive.”





Welcome from the Chief Executive

Welcome

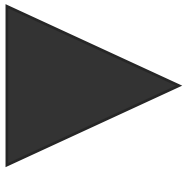
It has been a very special year for Cambridgeshire ACRE. As we celebrated our centenary in 2024 I have often reflected on the extraordinary journey that brought us here, from our beginnings as the Cambridgeshire Rural Community Council in 1924 to the diverse and vibrant charity we are today.

What has remained constant across those hundred years is our purpose: to work side by side with rural communities, helping people respond to challenges and seize opportunities so that their villages and neighbourhoods can flourish. That is what has always mattered most to us and it still drives everything we do.

I am delighted to present this Impact Report for 2024–2025. It showcases just some of the ways in which we have supported communities this year, whether through affordable housing, community hubs, environmental projects or strengthening the rural economy. Each achievement has only been possible because of the trust and commitment of our partners, funders, volunteers and most importantly the rural communities themselves.

I want to thank everyone who has played a part in our work this year. Your support ensures that Cambridgeshire ACRE remains strong, relevant and deeply connected to the communities we serve. Together we are building on our proud history and shaping a positive future for the next hundred years.

Hayley Neal
Chief Executive



The values that guide us

At Cambridgeshire ACRE our work is guided by a set of core values. These values have shaped our organisation throughout the past century and continue to inspire us today. They reflect how we approach our role as a trusted partner, how we work alongside communities and how we make decisions for the future. They are the foundation that ensures our actions match our purpose and they remind us of what matters most as we step into our second century.

1. Empowerment

We believe rural communities hold the answers to their own success. Our role is to provide the tools, support and encouragement that enable local people to lead and act.

2. Collaboration

We achieve more together. Through genuine partnerships built on trust and understanding, we work alongside communities and stakeholders, pooling expertise and resources.

3. Integrity

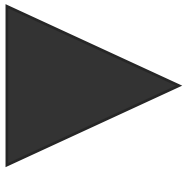
Honesty, openness and accountability are non-negotiable. Communities trust us because we always act independently and ethically, placing their needs above all else.

4. Creativity

Innovation drives us forward. We proactively seek imaginative, effective solutions that address rural challenges sustainably and uniquely.

5. Commitment

Our dedication to rural communities runs deep. We remain proactive, reliable and driven, tirelessly advocating and working for a sustainable, inclusive future for rural Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.



Our year at a glance: 2024–2025



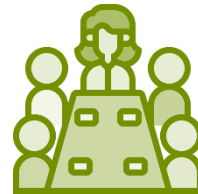
148 village halls supported with **269 cases** of advice and guidance resolved



29 new affordable homes built on rural exception sites



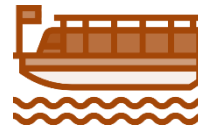
40 community hubs and living rooms operating weekly across three districts



37,771 visits to community hubs and living rooms in a single year



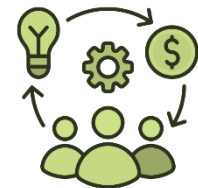
17,022 volunteer hours contributed, valued at more than **£300,000**



33 volunteer lock wardens gave **888 hours** of support to the Environment Agency



55 volunteers cleared **36 bags** of litter, reducing flood risk



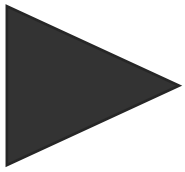
9 community businesses and social enterprises supported



£936,415 income generated to sustain our work with **88 per cent** from grants



120 partners, staff, trustees and volunteers joined us to celebrate our centenary



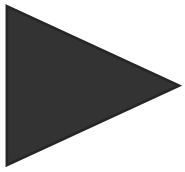
100 years of community action

Cambridgeshire ACRE was established in 1924 as the Cambridgeshire Rural Community Council. It was part of a new national movement to rebuild the social and economic life of the countryside in the years following the First World War. Inspired by the Carnegie Foundation's report on the English Countryside and the vision of Henry Morris, then Secretary of Education for Cambridgeshire, our founders recognised that villages needed more than fields and farms to flourish – they needed strong social and community infrastructure.

Our earliest work focused on creating village halls, offering adult education, supporting rural industries and providing opportunities for music and drama. During the Depression of the 1930s, we helped farmers and craftspeople modernise their practices and find new markets. In wartime, we coordinated volunteers, kept rural communities fed and healthy and made sure villages could come together even in the most difficult circumstances.

Through the decades that followed, our work expanded to include housing, planning, environmental action and supporting rural services. Yet our central purpose has never changed: we exist to work alongside rural communities, helping them respond to challenges and seize opportunities, so that people and places can thrive.

From a small acorn planted in 1924, Cambridgeshire ACRE has grown into a substantial oak tree with strong roots in every part of rural life across the county.



100 years of community action

The story of Cambridgeshire ACRE is one of continuity and change. Across a century, the needs of rural communities have evolved, yet the values that underpin our work have remained constant: collaboration, innovation and care for the people and places of Cambridgeshire.

Highlights from our first 100 years:

1920s

We supported some of the first village halls to be built in Cambridgeshire, replacing barns and cottages as meeting spaces. We also began a pioneering adult education programme, bringing lectures, music and drama to rural communities and helping to create opportunities for learning and cultural life at the heart of the village.

1930s

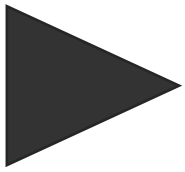
The Council expanded to cover more of the county and became a hub for voluntary organisations. We supported rural craftspeople to modernise and showcase their work and encouraged the creation of playing fields. By the end of the decade, our first County Fair brought together thousands of people to celebrate rural skills and traditions.

1940s

During the war, we coordinated voluntary services from our base in Cambridge, supporting food preservation, pig clubs, allotments and herb collection for medicines. We negotiated so village halls could still be used for social gatherings in the evenings, sustaining community morale. By the late 1940s, we began planning with villages for their recovery and future.

1950s–1970s

As rural communities adapted to post-war change, our work widened to include older people's welfare, planning for new housing and supporting the growth of village colleges. We played an important part in shaping community facilities and ensuring that villages retained their identity, even as transport links and new developments reshaped the county.



100 years of community action

1980s–2000s

The shift towards partnership working and local development meant we supported communities to access new funding opportunities, deliver local services and strengthen their voice with decision-makers. We became a trusted partner for local authorities and statutory agencies, while continuing to provide practical support to community groups and volunteers.

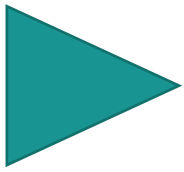
2000s–present

Our work now spans housing, the environment, health and wellbeing and the rural economy. We help communities respond to climate change, tackle isolation through hubs and village agents and create opportunities for social enterprise. The spirit of our founders, to work alongside rural people in shaping their future, continues to guide us.

Our centenary year in 2024 gave us a chance to celebrate these achievements. Through a travelling exhibition, a countywide programme of events and a celebration at Ely attended by His Royal Highness The Duke of Gloucester, we shared the story of our past and reaffirmed our commitment to the future. Above all, it was a celebration of the resilience and generosity of rural communities themselves.

Legacy of the Centenary

Our centenary celebrations were not only about marking the past but about creating a legacy for the future. The exhibition we developed is now available as a permanent online resource, capturing the story of rural Cambridgeshire for future generations. The events we held across the county strengthened relationships with parish councils, community groups and funders, reminding them of the role Cambridgeshire ACRE continues to play as the county's rural infrastructure body. Most importantly the centenary gave us a renewed sense of identity and confidence as we step into our second century, rooted in the trust and goodwill of the communities we serve.



Supporting community run assets

Community-run assets and owned assets like village halls, pubs and shops are at the heart of rural community life. They provide a vital hub for health and social activities, education and vital rural services to take place. Part of our role is to help these assets thrive.

We provide advice, support and training to the trustees of these community-run assets and help them run these to the highest possible standards for the benefit of their communities.



148 village halls in membership of Cambridgeshire ACRE and receiving our quarterly newsletter summarising news and developments.

269 cases of support successfully resolved from village halls requiring advice and guidance.

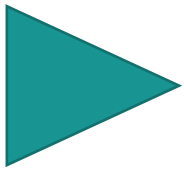


7 further Hallmark accreditations awarded to village halls reaching the quality standard for a well-run facility (six at Level 1 and one at Level 2).

5 training events attended by 145 village hall trustees allowing them to enhance their skills and knowledge of how to run their facility safely and successfully.



“We have been supported by Cambridgeshire ACRE with many issues from advice on trustees’ responsibilities to applying for grants, running the Community Hub and writing policies. No problem is ever too small and we always receive very helpful advice. As a small centre with little support for staff, you offer us a great service - thank you.” *Julie, Centre Manager at the Ellesmere Centre, Stetchworth*



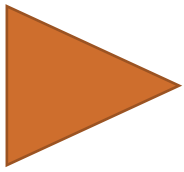
Supporting community run assets



Village Halls Advisor, Lisa, presenting to attendees at our annual community buildings conference which took place during Village Halls Week 2025.



Minister of State (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Daniel Zeichner (back row, red tie) presenting commemorative plaques to recipients of Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund grants.



Championing community-led housing and planning

We deliver housing needs surveys to find hidden housing need in rural communities and then work with local authorities, housing associations, town & parish councils and communities to build affordable rural homes.

We also support communities to research and develop neighbourhood plans to put in place planning policy for a neighbourhood area to guide future development.



29 new affordable homes built on rural exception sites.

16 new parish councils engaged to increase the pipeline of communities considering developing affordable rural homes.

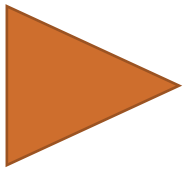


6 parishes whose need for affordable homes has been proven but where progress has stalled **given intensive support to resolve issues** to allow their schemes to progress.

12 neighbourhood planning groups supported by our Neighbourhood Planning Service, including 4 new groups for 2024/25.



"I never thought I would be able to afford to stay living in the village. South Cambridgeshire is such an expensive place to buy a house and many of my friends have had to leave Newton to find somewhere affordable to live. This development just for local people has meant I can stay living closer to my Mum and Dad, allowing them to help me look after my children whilst I go out to work and means I will be able to look after them when they get older and need my support." *Anonymised quote collected from one of the new owners of a shared ownership property at the new development at Harston Road, Newton*



Championing community-led housing and planning

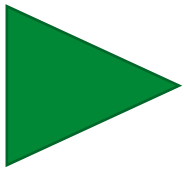


A development of new affordable homes at Harston Road, Newton, completed in December 2023, which provides six homes for affordable rent and two for shared ownership, all allocated to people with strong local connections.



Minister of State (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Daniel Zeichner paid a visit to Cambridgeshire to learn more about the importance of Defra's investment in the ACRE Network's rural housing enabling programme.





Tackling environmental challenges

We work with communities to help them tackle environmental issues challenges and consider predicted climate changes impacts.

We support their efforts to enhance their natural environment and improve community green spaces. We help communities plan for decarbonisation and net zero targets, as well as supporting them with issues of flooding and considering local mitigating actions.

We have also been highly successful at developing and leading environmental volunteering programmes.



33 volunteer lock wardens provided 888 hours of support to the Environment Agency, guiding boaters through locks on the River Great Ouse.

55 volunteers picked up 36 bags of litter, cleaning up their local river in Ramsey, helping to prevent flooding.

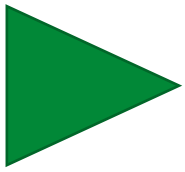


15 organisations successfully collaborated in our Water Care Partnership which brings people together to improve the water environment in the Old Bedford and Middle Level Catchment area.

8 farms and 9 parish councils received bespoke guidance on managing and maintaining new habitats created on their land through our New Life on the Old West project.



“Being able to volunteer outside in some of our most environmentally precious and picturesque locations is a real bonus for me. Meeting and helping boaters is rewarding, although sometimes the conversation delays the locking! The opportunity to volunteer with a variety of different people is so enjoyable!” *Feedback collected from Roger, one of our Anglian Waterways volunteers*



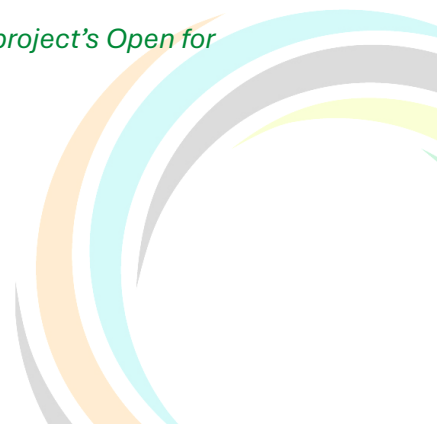
Tackling environmental challenges

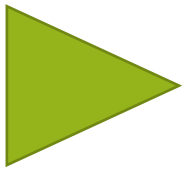


Some of Cambridgeshire ACRE's Anglian Waterways Volunteers assisting boaters to safely navigate a lock at Houghton on the River Great Ouse.



Some of the many partners who took part in our New Life on the Old West project's Open for Nature Day on Over Village Green on 17 August 2024.

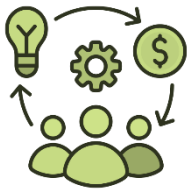




Strengthening the rural economy and employment

We are committed to developing and delivering projects that lever in funding to strengthen rural businesses, encourage support networks that bring people together and lead community-led development programmes that increases people's life chances.

Our place-making partnerships take a bottom-up approach to achieving sustainable rural development, boosting the local economy and getting more people into employment.

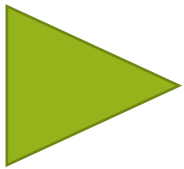


2 prospective and 7 existing rural social enterprise businesses supported to consider the next steps in their development.

2 events were held to demystify social enterprise and to introduce the concept of community owned business to our network. 69 individuals attended these events.



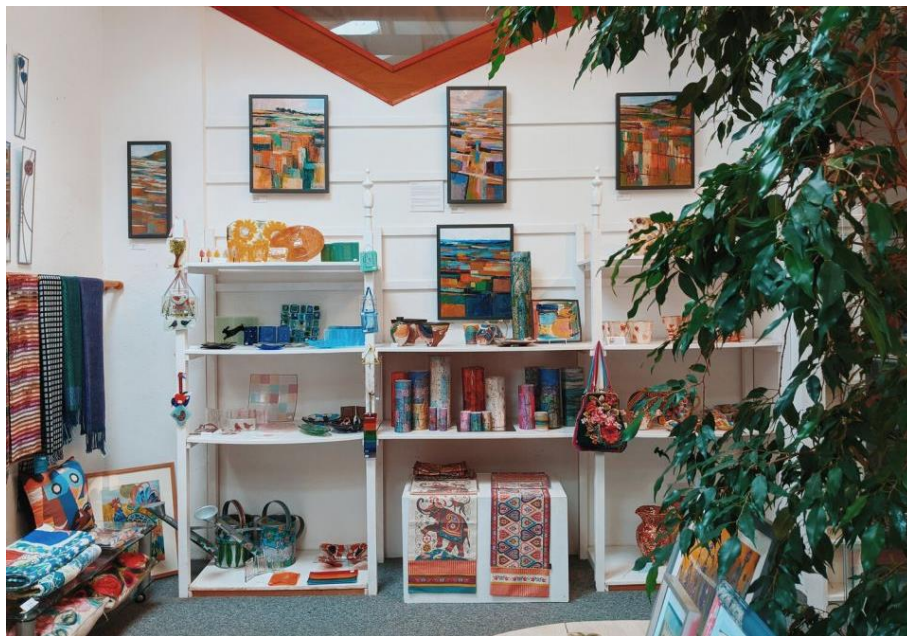
“Thank you for providing us with a template for working up a full business plan for our business. Although we knew our idea was strong, we really weren’t sure where to start, so the template was invaluable for making us think through what we needed to do and helped us identify the gaps where we hadn’t completed enough research. The feedback you provided on the initial draft was also helpful and allowed us to strengthen the plan further. Having a detailed business plan has been critical to allowing us to make a stronger case for support from the wider community.” *Feedback from one of the community-owned businesses we supported through our social enterprise work*



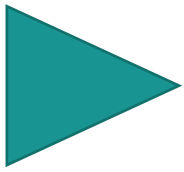
Strengthening the rural economy and employment



Inside the new community space created at Fenland Families and Baby Bank, one of the community businesses advised by Cambridgeshire ACRE.



Inside the Haddenham Arts Centre, another of the community businesses that received support through our work as part of the Social Enterprise Consortium.



Improving community health and wellbeing

We are committed to ensuring fairer and more equitable health and wellbeing outcomes for people living in rural areas, where access to services can be much more difficult.

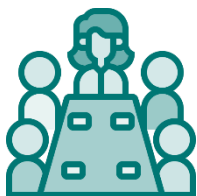
Through our work, we see at first-hand the issues that rurality can cause, especially where it is compounded by significant deprivation and isolation.

Cambridgeshire ACRE works with partners and communities to understand inequalities in health and wellbeing and to tackle these issues at a local level.



40 Community Hubs and Community Living Rooms operating across East Cambridgeshire, Fenland and South Cambridgeshire, opening their doors week in, week out, offering local people a place to come together for mutual support.

17,022 volunteer hours provided by those successfully leading Community Hubs/Living Rooms in their communities. When valued at the median pay rate for their district, these hours are worth over £303,768.

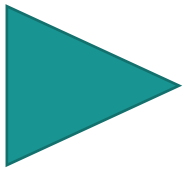


37,771 visits made to Community Hubs/Living Rooms. 15% of these visits are estimated to have been made by unique visitors, meaning an estimated 5,666 people across East Cambridgeshire, Fenland and South Cambridgeshire are making regular use of their local Hub.

60 households supported through our Cambridgeshire Home Energy Support Service to clear £25,740 of fuel debt.



Our specially trained Macmillan Village Agents supported 27 individuals either living with cancer themselves or who were family members of those affected by cancer.



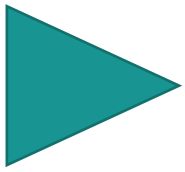
Improving community health and wellbeing

“It’s one of the nicest groups I’ve ever been to. I love the company here. You can just be yourself. If you want to talk you can, if you don’t, that’s fine too. We have a lot more men joining us now and we’ll chat about everything – sport, politics, what’s on TV. It’s not cliquey at all. Everyone is just lovely.” *Anonymised quote from an attendee at the Duxford Community Hub*

“Thank you for the fantastic work that you and the Cambridgeshire ACRE team do for our rural communities and their hubs. Your information, advice and guidance, plus all your active and enthusiastic support, do make a genuine difference. Thanks to the Community Hubs initiative, we are able to impact on the lives of many local people. Their appreciation of our joint efforts makes it all very worthwhile..” *Robin, Co-Lead Volunteer at the Haddenham Social Hub*

“Thank you so much for filling up my oil tank ready for winter. I really appreciate it - you really are life savers ... not all heroes wear capes..” *Anonymised quote from a recipient of financial support through our Cambridgeshire Home Energy Support Service project*

“My life is getting better since Kathy has been supporting me. Grief does terrible things to you and since I lost my partner, I’ve really struggled. Step by step, I am rebuilding my life and knowing I have her support, when I need it, has made a world of difference. *Anonymised quote from a recipient of support through our Fenland Community Cancer Champions project*



Improving community health and wellbeing

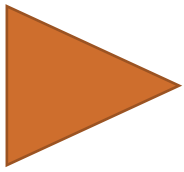


Graham James, lead volunteer at the Little Thetford Community Hub talks to an attendee at a Hub session in November 2024.



Attendees at the Linton Community Hub picked up their tables and chairs and took their Hub outside in a bid to make the most of the good weather.





Working in partnership and providing consultancy

We work with a wide range of partners and all the work we undertake involves collaboration and joint delivery of projects.

We often provide in-depth consultancy support to organisations and communities who use our expertise to help them achieve specific goals, delivering research, public consultation, partnership development & management, project development & funding or community / voluntary and cultural sector engagement.



30+ partner organisations worked alongside us to deliver our work.

2 consultancy contracts completed to support communities with their community developments or partners with more complex work.

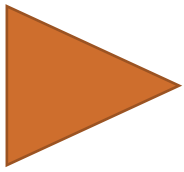


120 staff, trustees, ex-staff & trustees, partners and funders, along with our distinguished guest, His Royal Highness The Duke of Gloucester, joined us to mark our Centenary in style.

“His Royal Highness thoroughly enjoyed meeting so many enthusiastic and friendly people and viewing the Exhibition Boards around the Church, on the occasion of the Centenary Celebration. The Duke would wish to pass on his thanks and appreciation to all those involved for such an interesting and memorable afternoon.”

“The Duke of Gloucester send you and all at Cambridgeshire ACRE, his warmest regards and wishes you well for the future.”

Text taken from letter received from the Private Secretary of His Royal Highness The Duke of Gloucester following his attendance at Cambridgeshire ACRE’s Centenary celebration event in June 2024



Working in partnership and providing consultancy

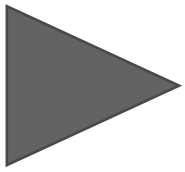


His Royal Highness The Duke of Gloucester cutting our Centenary celebration cake alongside our President, His Majesty the King's Lord Lieutenant of Cambridgeshire, Julie Spence.



Cambridgeshire ACRE's staff team (taken in March 2025).





Building on 100 years of experience

Cambridgeshire ACRE today looks very different from the organisation that first met at King's College, Cambridge in 1925. One hundred years ago, our funding came almost entirely from the local council. Over time, and particularly since the UK's departure from the European Union, we have had to rethink how we sustain our work. Today, we operate with a mixed funding model, drawing on statutory sources such as local councils and Defra, corporate partners such as Cadent Gas and Anglian Water and philanthropic support from trusts, foundations and the National Lottery.

In 2024/25, we generated just over £936,000 in income. Around 88 per cent of this came from grants, with the remainder made up of consultancy, training, membership, donations and investment income. This model provides greater resilience and reflects the value that a wide range of partners place on our work. It also challenges us to remain innovative and entrepreneurial in how we fund and deliver services.

Our new three-year strategy (2025–2028) sets out five priorities:

Rural leadership - Strengthen Cambridgeshire ACRE as a leading, influential organisation, ensuring we are a trusted, proactive resource for rural communities, valued for our expertise, guidance and community-driven impact.

Community resilience - Support local people and organisations to create vibrant, connected and sustainable communities, helping them address challenges such as isolation, inequality and access to services.

Affordable and sustainable homes - Champion the delivery of affordable rural housing and promote sustainable planning solutions, ensuring people can remain in their villages and new homes contribute positively to local communities.

Climate and environment - Work alongside communities to respond to climate change, from flood resilience and biodiversity enhancement to decarbonising community buildings and encouraging local action for a greener future.

Rural economy and enterprise - Help rural businesses, social enterprises and community ventures to flourish, building a more inclusive and sustainable economy that creates opportunities for all.

As we step into our second century, our mission is clear: to work side by side with rural communities so that people can flourish, connections grow and everyone can thrive. We are proud of our past, but even more excited about the future.

Future challenges

Rural communities face major pressures. Housing is unaffordable for many families. Isolation and inequality persist, especially without transport. Climate change brings flooding and biodiversity loss. Funding is uncertain.

Cambridgeshire ACRE will stay flexible and innovative, working alongside communities to meet these challenges with creativity, resilience and determination.



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Find us on social media @cambsacre



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