

Thriving rural communities

Supporting people, places and communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

Cambridgeshire ACRE's Impact Report for 2025-2026



A reminder about Cambridgeshire ACRE and what we do...

Our vision is of rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough where people flourish, connections grow and everyone can thrive.

We do this by inspiring, leading and partnering with rural communities, enabling local people to create positive, lasting change for themselves.



1. Support community buildings



2. Facilitate rural housing



3. Improve wellbeing and inclusion



4. Protect the environment



5. Promote economic growth



6. Provide rural leadership

A year of supporting thriving rural communities

This year has been one of both challenge and opportunity for rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. While inflation has eased, many households continue to face pressure from the rising cost of living. Volunteers and community organisations remain under strain, access to affordable housing continues to be a challenge and major changes across local government and the NHS are creating uncertainty about the future shape of services.

Throughout the year, Cambridgeshire ACRE has worked alongside communities to help people remain connected, supported and able to shape their own future. From securing affordable homes for local families and strengthening community buildings, to supporting people experiencing isolation and helping communities take action for the environment, our work has focused on enabling rural communities to thrive.

We are proud of what has been achieved together. More than 40,000 visits were made to Community Hubs, 53 affordable homes were delivered and thousands of volunteer hours helped strengthen community life across the county. Behind every number is a person, organisation or community whose quality of life has been improved through collective action and partnership working.

As an organisation, we have continued to invest in our people, governance, systems and future direction. We adopted a new organisational strategy, strengthened our approach to measuring impact and adopted the Charity Governance Code, helping ensure that Cambridgeshire ACRE remains effective, accountable and resilient in the years ahead.

We would like to thank our members, volunteers, funders, staff, trustees and partners for their continued support. Everything in this report has been achieved through collaboration, shared commitment and a belief that rural communities matter.



David Olney
Chairperson



Hayley Neal
Chief Executive

Headline numbers



161 community buildings supported to run safely and sustainably, ensuring local communities have places to meet, learn, celebrate and support one another.



53 new affordable homes delivered, enabling local people and families to remain in the communities they call home.



40,803 visits made to our Community Hubs, reducing isolation and helping people access practical support close to home.



21,000+ hours of volunteering time given in support of our work, extending the reach and impact of our services.



36 waterways volunteers helped improve access to and care of local waterways, contributing more than 1,200 hours of practical action.



81 community and public sector partners worked with us to deliver stronger support for rural communities.



11 consultancy commissions helped local organisations plan for the future, strengthen services and develop new opportunities.



18 staff helped communities access trusted advice, practical support and specialist expertise across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Why our work mattered this year

Rural communities faced:

1. Rising living costs

Although inflation eased during the year, many households continued to feel the cumulative impact of higher energy, food and housing costs. Rural residents often faced additional costs associated with transport and accessing services, increasing pressure on household budgets.

2. Pressure on volunteers

Volunteers remain the backbone of many community organisations, but recruiting and retaining people has become increasingly challenging. Many groups reported volunteer fatigue, with a small number of individuals carrying a growing share of local responsibilities.

3. Housing affordability challenges

Access to affordable housing remained a significant issue across many rural communities. Rising house prices and private rents have made it increasingly difficult for local people, particularly younger residents and those on lower incomes, to remain in the communities where they live and work.

4. Digital exclusion

As more public, health and financial services shift online, people without the skills, confidence, equipment or connectivity needed to engage digitally risk becoming increasingly isolated. Digital exclusion continues to affect access to information, opportunities and essential services.

5. Health inequalities

Health outcomes can vary significantly between communities, with people in rural areas often facing additional barriers to accessing support and services. Factors such as isolation, transport limitations and an ageing population can contribute to poorer health and wellbeing outcomes.

6. Local government and NHS change

The pace of change across local government and the NHS continued to create uncertainty for communities and voluntary organisations alike. Structural reforms, changing priorities and pressures on public finances have had implications for how local services are planned, delivered and accessed.

Our response

We supported communities to remain resilient, connected and able to shape their own future.

The following pages explore our impact in more detail.



Stronger community buildings

The challenge:

Village halls and community buildings face rising costs, ageing volunteers and growing community expectations.

We helped by:

- Providing quality, solid advice
- Delivering training to address common concerns
- Providing energy audits
- Facilitating peer support
- Hosting our annual conference to bring halls and buildings together

Key figures:

- 161 buildings in membership
- 245 enquiries answered
- 130 conference delegates
- 15 training sessions delivered, attended by an average of 18 delegates per session

Case study - Haddenham Methodist Church: Building confidence for the future

When the trustees of Haddenham Methodist Church wanted to strengthen the long-term sustainability of their community building, they turned to Cambridgeshire ACRE for support. Through a combination of governance advice, peer mentoring and sustainability guidance, the church was able to review how it was managed, identify opportunities for improvement and develop greater confidence in its future direction.



Working alongside Cambridgeshire ACRE's Community Buildings team, trustees received practical support tailored to their needs. The process helped them strengthen governance arrangements, explore ways to improve the building's sustainability and benefit from shared learning with other volunteer-led organisations facing similar challenges.

As a result, trustees felt better equipped to manage their building, plan ahead and continue providing a valued community space for local residents. The case study highlights how trusted, ongoing support can help community buildings become more resilient, sustainable and ready to serve their communities into the future.

The result: By combining governance, sustainability and peer support, we helped local trustees build the confidence, skills and resilience needed to safeguard an important community asset for future generations.

The impact of
our work:

**More rural
communities
retained
viable, well-
managed
spaces for
local services,
activities and
social
connection.**

More affordable rural homes

The challenge:

Many local people are priced out of the villages where they live and work.

We helped by:

- Carrying out independent housing needs surveys to understand local demand for affordable homes.
- Working with parish councils, housing associations and local authorities to identify opportunities for affordable housing.
- Providing evidence and advice to support the development of rural affordable housing schemes.
- Helping communities navigate the often-complex process of bringing affordable homes forward.

Key figures:

- 7 housing needs surveys carried out
- 112 homes identified as needed
- 53 affordable homes delivered

Case study: Helping local people stay rooted in their community

When a Cambridgeshire ACRE Housing Needs Survey identified the need for affordable housing in Witchford, partners worked together to create 17 homes for local people, including 11 affordable rented homes and six shared ownership properties.



One resident, Vince White, moved into an affordable rented bungalow when the first phase was completed. For him, returning to Witchford meant being able to live once again in a community he knew, close to familiar faces and local services. He also described the strong sense of neighbourliness that has grown among residents, saying: “We all look after each other here.”

The result: Affordable housing has helped local people like Vince White remain connected, supported and rooted in the rural communities they call home.

The impact of our work:

Local evidence gathered through our housing work helped support the delivery of affordable homes for people with local connections.

Healthier and more connected communities

The challenge:

People in rural communities can face barriers to accessing health, wellbeing and support services, while loneliness and social isolation continue to affect quality of life.

We helped by:

- Supporting and strengthening a network of Community Hubs where people can access local activities, advice and support.
- Connecting residents with services, information and community opportunities that improve wellbeing and reduce isolation.
- Providing practical and emotional support to people affected by cancer through our Macmillan Village Agent service.
- Raising awareness of cancer signs, symptoms and screening through community outreach and engagement activities.
- Working with local partners to ensure support is available closer to home and reaches those most in need.

Key figures:

- 40 Community Hubs maintained as welcoming local spaces
- 40,803 visits to Community Hubs across Cambridgeshire
- 283 people regularly volunteering at their local Community Hub
- 129 people affected by cancer supported by our Macmillan Village Agents
- 357 residents reached through cancer awareness sessions

Case study - Finding support close to home

After retiring and losing confidence following a period of poor health, Margaret found herself spending most days alone at home. Living in a rural village with limited public transport, she was unsure where to turn for help and gradually became more isolated.



A neighbour encouraged Margaret to visit her local Community Hub, where she was welcomed by volunteers and introduced to a Village Agent. Over several weeks, the Village Agent helped her access information about benefits, arranged support with transport to appointments and connected her with local activities that matched her interests. As her confidence grew, Margaret began attending the Hub regularly, meeting new people and rebuilding her social connections.

What started as a search for practical support became a route back into community life, helping Margaret feel more informed, connected and independent. This reflects the strength of Community Hubs and Village Agents working together as a single, trusted support system.

The result: By providing trusted local support, we helped prevent isolation from becoming crisis, enabling residents to remain connected, confident and independent.

The impact of our work:

People facing health, financial and practical challenges received trusted support closer to home.

Communities taking action for the environment

The challenge:

Climate change, biodiversity loss, pressure on waterways and rising energy costs are creating growing challenges for rural communities and the places they care about.

We helped by:

- Restoring habitats and improving local green spaces and waterways.
- Coordinating volunteers to make waterways safer and more accessible.
- Helping pupils care for endangered European eels before releasing them into the River Ouse.
- Helping Soham residents prevent sewer blockages through Anglian Water's *Just Bin It* campaign.
- Providing energy audits to help organisations reduce costs and improve sustainability.

Key figures:

- 36 volunteers giving 1,245 hours to local waterways
- 10,718m² of ponds, 53,715m² of meadows, 1,475m of hedgerows and 2,000m of berms created or enhanced
- 2 primary schools hosted European eels
- 300+ people engaged in Soham, helping reduce wet wipes found in drains by 67%
- 16 energy audits delivered

Case study – Bringing nature back to village green spaces

When volunteers in Little Thetford wanted to improve their public open spaces, they lacked the technical knowledge and support needed to turn their ideas into action.

Working with Cambridgeshire ACRE, the volunteers received practical advice, access to specialist expertise and support to develop a habitat improvement plan. Together, they created new wildflower areas and grass buffer strips, planted native hedgerows, created a small wildlife pond and enhanced a further pond to provide better habitat for wildlife. Local residents and volunteers took part in planting days, learning new skills and helping to care for the sites.

Within months, the area had become a more attractive place for people to enjoy, while creating valuable habitat for pollinators, birds and other wildlife. The village played host to an ‘Open for Nature Day’ showcasing the habitat improvements to a wider audience. Little Thetford was just one of eight parishes we worked in during our New Life on the Old West project where volunteers and parish councils worked together to make environmental improvements to their villages.

The result: We helped residents turn concern for the environment into practical action, creating lasting benefits for both local wildlife and the community.



The impact of
our work:

**Communities
improved
local
environments
while
strengthening
resilience to
future
environmental
challenges.**

Stronger local economies and community enterprise

The challenge:

Rural communities need strong local organisations, businesses and community enterprises to sustain services, create opportunities and keep wealth circulating locally.

We helped by:

- Supporting community enterprises and social enterprises to develop sustainable services that meet local needs.
- Providing business planning, feasibility and governance advice to help community organisations grow and thrive.
- Helping communities explore ways to retain and generate wealth locally through community-led initiatives.
- Delivering specialist consultancy and practical support through our network of expert associates.
- Bringing together local knowledge, evidence and expertise to turn community ideas into viable projects.

Key figures:

- 81 partner organisations supported through membership and advice services
- 18 consultancy commissions completed
- £30,000 consultancy income generated and reinvested into charitable activities
- 36 organisations supported with in-depth business planning, feasibility or governance advice
- 9 specialist associates engaged through our consultancy network

Case study - Building a stronger future for local young people

Phoenix Youth Provision CIC plays an important role in supporting young people in Whittlesey, providing activities, opportunities and a safe place to meet. As the organisation looked to the future, it wanted to strengthen its long-term sustainability and explore how it could maximise its impact within the local community.



Through the Whittlesey Community Wealth Building programme, Cambridgeshire ACRE worked with Phoenix Youth Provision CIC to review its current activities, assess opportunities for growth and identify ways to strengthen its organisation. Together, we explored how the CIC could build on its existing strengths, develop new income streams, make the most of local partnerships and increase the social and economic value it creates for the community.

The support provided a clearer strategic direction, helping the organisation identify practical opportunities for development while strengthening its ability to plan for the future. As a result, Phoenix Youth Provision CIC is better placed to sustain and expand its work, ensuring more young people can benefit from its services in the years ahead.

The result: We helped strengthen a locally rooted organisation, increasing its resilience and supporting its contribution to Whittlesey's social and economic wellbeing.

The impact of our work:

Community organisations were better equipped to develop, test and progress their ideas.

Giving rural communities a voice

The challenge:

Major changes to local government, the NHS and public services risk overlooking the distinct needs and perspectives of rural communities unless their voices are actively heard and represented.

We helped by:

- Championing the interests of rural communities in discussions about Local Government Reorganisation and devolution.
- Ensuring rural perspectives were reflected in conversations about changes to NHS services and health provision.
- Providing evidence, insight and local intelligence to inform decision-makers and policy makers.
- Bringing together community organisations, public sector partners and residents to discuss emerging challenges and opportunities.
- Promoting rural proofing so that policies, investments and services work effectively for people living in villages and market towns.

Key figures:

- 7 consultation responses submitted on behalf of rural communities
- 322 partnership boards, steering groups or strategic forums attended
- 277 community organisations represented through our networks
- 9 policy briefings, position statements or evidence submissions produced
- 5,000+ households and organisations engaged through consultations, workshops or events
- 12 senior meetings held with local authority, NHS or Combined Authority leaders
- 40 Community Hubs acting as a route for gathering and sharing rural intelligence

Case study - Putting rural communities at the heart of decision-making

As East Cambridgeshire District Council considered how to improve the way services and policies respond to rural needs, it commissioned Cambridgeshire ACRE to undertake a rural proofing review.



Drawing on our knowledge of local communities, evidence gathered through our networks and insights from residents and partner organisations, we examined how decisions can affect people living in villages and market towns differently from those in urban areas. The review highlighted practical steps the Council could take to ensure that future policies, investments and services are designed with rural communities in mind.

The commission reinforced the importance of understanding issues such as transport, access to services, digital connectivity and community capacity when making strategic decisions. It also demonstrated the value of having a trusted organisation able to gather and represent rural perspectives.

The result: We helped ensure that rural voices influenced decision-making, leading to policies and services that better reflect the realities of rural life.

The impact of our work:

Rural communities were better represented in discussions affecting the future of local services and decision-making.

**Building a
stronger
organisation
so we can
serve
communities
more
effectively**

Strong rural communities need a strong Cambridgeshire ACRE. This year we invested in our people, systems, governance and long-term sustainability so that we can continue providing high-quality support, respond to emerging challenges and maximise our impact across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

We strengthened our organisation by:

- Adopting a new organisational strategy to provide a clear long-term direction and ensure our resources remain focused on the needs of rural communities.
- Developing a marketing and communications strategy to help more communities understand, access and benefit from our services.
- Investing in improved HR systems and processes so staff can spend more time supporting people and communities and less time on administration.
- Strengthening our approach to impact measurement, enabling us to better understand, improve and demonstrate the difference our work makes.
- Investing in staff wellbeing, learning and development to maintain a skilled, resilient and effective workforce for the communities we serve.
- Adopting the Charity Governance Code to strengthen accountability, transparency and good governance across the organisation.

Key figures:

- 1 new organisational strategy adopted
- 1 new marketing strategy launched
- 100% of staff are proud to work for Cambridgeshire ACRE and would recommend it as a great place to work
- £988,080 social value generated through our projects (N.B. only 7 out of 12 measured in 2025/26)
- Charity Governance Code adopted by the Board

Case study – Why our people choose to make a difference

Cambridgeshire ACRE's Village Agents are united by a belief that everyone deserves support, connection and the opportunity to thrive, regardless of where they live. Sophie Payne, Kari Payne and Lucille Bingham each describe the privilege of working alongside rural communities, listening to people's stories and helping them navigate the challenges they face.



For them, the role is about far more than providing information or signposting services. It is about building relationships, reducing loneliness, strengthening confidence and helping people find practical solutions to problems that can otherwise feel overwhelming. They speak of the satisfaction that comes from small but meaningful moments: securing safe accommodation, helping someone access healthcare, or simply knowing that a previously isolated resident now feels part of their community.

The result: The commitment, skills and local knowledge of our staff help ensure that people across rural communities can access trusted support when they need it most.

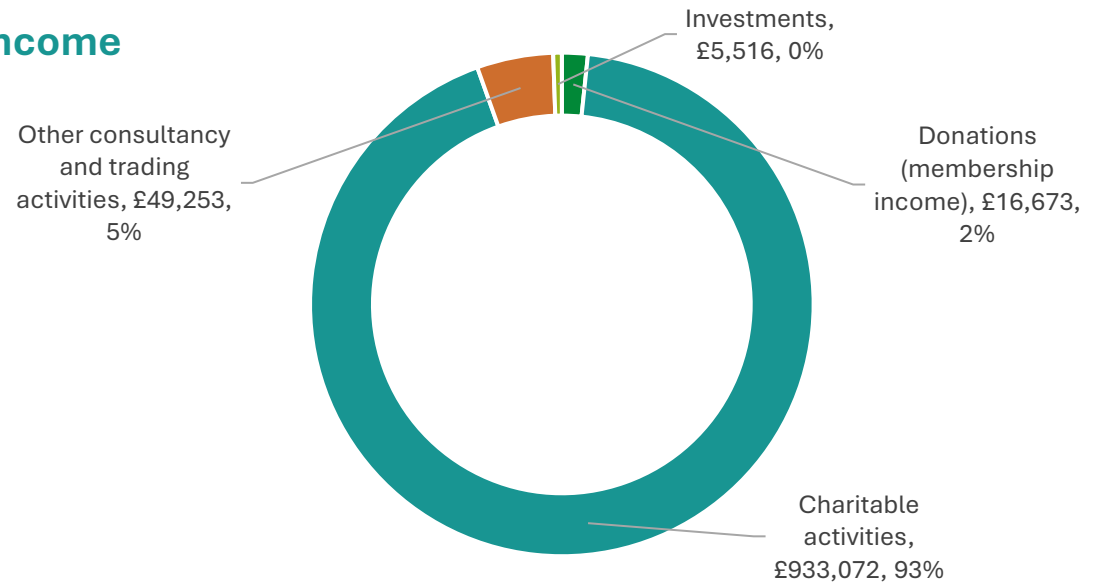
The impact of our work:

A stronger Cambridgeshire ACRE is better placed to provide sustainable support for rural communities in the years ahead.

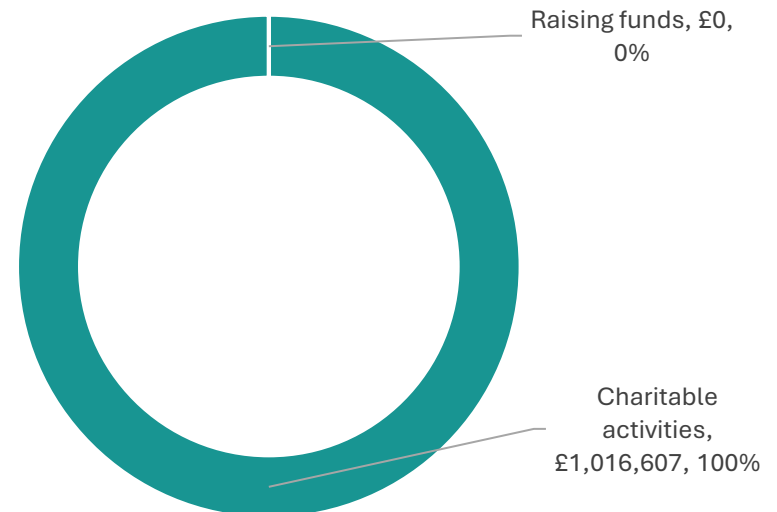
Financial snapshot

- £1,004,514 income
- £1,016,607 invested in charitable activities
- £49,253 earned through consultancy and trading
- £16,673 membership income
- Reserves equivalent to 4.5 months expenditure
- **We are not just spending money; we are converting financial, volunteer and partnership resources into community benefit.**

Income



Expenditure



Looking ahead to 2026/27

We will:

1. **Expand the Futureproofing Cambridgeshire's Community Buildings programme**, helping more village halls become sustainable, resilient and community-focused.
2. **Support community buildings to reduce energy and water consumption**, building on our work to improve environmental sustainability.
3. **Progress affordable housing projects**, helping communities move identified housing need towards new affordable homes.
4. **Strengthen early-stage rural housing development**, including site identification and support for stalled schemes.
5. **Expand the Community Hubs Network**, bringing trusted local support to more rural residents.
6. **Invest Crisis and Resilience funding in local communities**, enabling Community Hubs to respond to emerging local needs.

7. **Develop new approaches to health and wellbeing support,** including Village Agent Plus and stronger referral pathways.

8. **Grow our environmental work,** including waterways volunteering, water resilience initiatives and the Water Care Partnership.



9. **Champion rural voices during Local Government Reorganisation, devolution and NHS change,** ensuring rural communities remain represented in decision-making.

10. **Strengthen Cambridgeshire ACRE itself,** through improved financial resilience, diversified income, enhanced impact measurement, staff wellbeing investment and a growing membership network.

About Cambridgeshire ACRE

Cambridgeshire ACRE is an independent charity and part of the national ACRE Network.

Our vision is of thriving rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. We provide advice and help to rural communities to enable them to seize opportunities and drive their community projects forward.

Keep up to date on Cambridgeshire ACRE's work by visiting our website www.cambsacre.org.uk or find us on social media by searching for [@cambsacre](#)



You can also sign up to receive our monthly e-newsletter, '*Staying in Touch*' by completing this form:

<https://aidemail.co.uk/subscribe/cambsacre/staying-in-touch-recipients-968>