

Review of the Cumbria Rural Forum

**Considering its purpose and effectiveness
with recommendations for its future operation**

Carried out on behalf of ACTION with Communities
in Cumbria

by

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1 Introduction

Shirley Muir Associates was commissioned to undertake a “review of the Cumbria Rural Forum to consider the purpose, effectiveness and potential of this voluntary group serviced by Voluntary ACTION Cumbria”.

The following tasks were outlined in the brief:

- Engagement with the Cumbria Rural Forum Business Group to review understanding of the Forum, its role and their aspirations for it.
- Sampling of Cumbria Rural Forum ‘members’ views about and aspirations for the Forum, as a rural voice for Cumbria.
- Compiling a report and recommendations for the Forum and presenting this to the Business Group and potentially the ACT Board.
- Drafting public information for the Forum:
 - a web page for the ACT website
 - an article for the ACT Gazette.

The following methods were used to gather and analyse information:

- Review of information available about the Cumbria Rural Forum, including a review of the Rural Briefings and recent minutes of the Cumbria Rural Forum Business Group.
- Review of ACT information on the website and in the Annual Report and newsletter.
- Individual interviews with each member of the Cumbria Rural Forum Business Group to review their understanding of the role of the Forum and their aspirations for its future.
- Online survey of Cumbria Rural Forum ‘members’ views about and aspirations for the Forum, as a rural voice for Cumbria.
- Interviews with a sample of Cumbria Rural Forum ‘members’ to gather more detailed views.
- Article for the ACT Gazette for information and inviting participation in the survey.
- Consultation with the Business Group on the findings and draft report.

Section 2 of this report explores and defines what the Cumbria Rural Forum is; section 3 looks at the operation of the Forum and Business Group; and section 4 explores the current rural issues and priorities. Conclusions are drawn at the end of each section; and summary conclusions provided in section 5. Recommendations are given in section 6 and a revised description of the Cumbria Rural Forum and its operation is proposed in section 7.

The results of the surveys are given at appendices 1 and 2 and incorporated where relevant in the report.

2. What is the Cumbria Rural Forum?

2.1 Definitions

The Cumbria Rural Forum (CRF) is described on the ACTion with Communities in Cumbria (ACT) website under one of the '*what we do*' pages¹ as:

“The Cumbria Rural Forum is about people living in a changing countryside and their experiences, engagement with their communities, and accumulated skills and wisdom. Each year there is a programme of events centred on key issues facing rural communities.

The Forum started in 1991 as the Cumbria Countryside Forum, providing organisations and individuals with a place to come together and discuss issues of concern to rural life. In 2000 the forum was changed to become the Cumbria Rural Forum. More information about the forum, its structure and the work it carries out can be found [here](#). Information about future forums can be found on the [Events](#) page.”

Clicking on the [Events](#) link takes the user to a new page but there are currently no events shown.

Clicking on the [here](#) link takes the user to a new page with the following description of the function of the CRF, produced in 2011²:

“The Cumbria Rural Forum exists to enable discussions that help to clarify the rural dimension to current issues and to be an effective voice for rural communities. The work of the Forum is supported by a Business Group which is appointed by and reports to ACT’s Board. The administration and activities of both the Forum and Business Group are supported by ACT.”

The role of the Business Group is described as “to give leadership to and enable the successful operation of the Forum”.

2.2 Views of the CRF Business Group

Individual interviews were undertaken with each member of the Business Group, when the role and operation of the CRF was discussed. The following paragraph attempts to collate and summarise the joint views expressed:

The role of the CRF is to identify rural community issues, to research and clarify them, to have an open debate with relevant people and organisations, to inform and influence policy makers and, via the Rural Briefings, to inform local community groups and individuals.

Even amongst Business Group members, there was some confusion over the terms “forum”, “business group” and “members”. For some the terms “forum” and “business

¹ <http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk/WhatWeDo/CumbriaRuralForum.aspx> accessed July 2016

² ACTion with Communities in Cumbria 2011 *CRF CV*

group” were interchangeable; and one person thought that the Business Group was intended to represent businesses.

The ACT website states that “The Business Group’s role is to give leadership to and enable the successful operation of the Forum”, which suggests that ‘the Forum’ is an entity in its own right. The CRF, however, does not have a membership; rather it is a mailing list of contacts who have been to a CRF conference and/or expressed an interest in receiving Rural Briefing papers or other relevant information.

A dictionary definition of a forum is a situation or meeting in which people can talk about a problem or matter especially of public interest. The way that the CRF works without a membership as such seems appropriate, given that rural community issues are quite diverse and some will affect some communities and individuals more than others. The CRF has offered open invitations to partake in debates or conferences on different subjects. The mailing list represents a list of people who have been or may be interested in rural topics rather than members of a forum.

2.3 Conclusions – What is the Cumbria Rural Forum?

The Cumbria Rural Forum is not an entity, it is a process.

The process is intended to:

- Collect views and information about current important issues affecting rural communities
- Debate and clarify the issues and explore potential solutions
- Use that information to inform and influence both policy-makers and community action

The current roles of the Business Group and ACT in delivering this process are explored in the next two sections.

3. Operation of the CRF and the Business Group

3.1 Conferences

Interviews with Business Group members revealed that the operation of the CRF and the Business Group has changed, mainly due to a diminished budget. The Business Group used to organise a programme of conferences. It would map rural issues, decide on priorities and organise conferences accordingly. This has not happened in recent years; and the ACT website shows that the last CRF conference was in July 2013.

Cumbria County Council, which provides annual funding for the CRF, had questioned the value and effectiveness of large conferences, particularly in the current economic climate. The operation of the CRF has changed significantly as a result.

Interviews with the Business Group members revealed that most of those who were members when it regularly organised conferences and events felt that it was a more effective way for the CRF to operate.

One reason for this is that the conferences provided regular feedback from delegates on future issues and priorities that they would like to see considered. Members of the Business Group said that more public-facing activity and engagement led to more feedback and therefore enabled the Group to review priorities at regular intervals. Without this feedback, it has been more difficult for the Group to prioritise topics and organise activity accordingly.

Another issue arising from the loss of regular conferences is that the CRF no longer has a high profile among communities and organisations.

It was noted that there seems to be fewer meetings of the Business Group with lower numbers attending and members felt that there is a risk of losing momentum. Some members of the Business Group commented that the current way it is operating, mostly as a closed-door discussion, feels less effective.

Despite concerns about whether it is as effective as it used to be, all members of the Business Group felt that the CRF still has an important role to play, especially now that public agencies' resources have been cut.

When conferences were regularly organised they were well-attended; feedback from attendees was reported to be very positive; and comments from the Business Group and personal experience of the author confirms that the conferences were popular events, often with a lively atmosphere and a lot of discussion.

One long-standing member of the Business Group, however, questioned whether conferences effect any change or do they simply confirm the existing views of those who attend?

The CRF survey attempted to explore whether the conferences were effective by asking how useful attendees had found the conference and whether they had done anything different as a result.

Fifteen people answered the survey. Of the eight people who said they had attended a conference, three said it was 'very useful' and five said it was 'quite useful'. In answer to the subsequent question, "Did you do anything different as a result?" only three people said yes, stating:

'Over the years in my role as a Village Agent for the Northern Fells Group we have implemented changes from ideas we have picked up from conferences we have attended.'

'More alert to need.'

'Followed up on the Community Energy Champions work in Alston.'

It is difficult to assess how effective the conferences were; there may have been small changes made by individual attendees that led to more significant results, but, if so, there is no record of these. Feedback from attendees at the conferences was reported to be very positive but it was gathered at the conferences rather than later, because this was found to be the best way to get more responses.

Respondents to the CRF survey were also asked the following multi-choice question:

The Cumbria Rural Forum has limited resources. How best can it help to tackle these issues? Please rank in order of importance.

Scores are accumulated as follows, where the first priority scores 5, the second 4 and so on.

| | |
|----|--|
| 61 | Encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities |
| 51 | Bring agencies and communities together, e.g. at a conference or seminar |
| 47 | Lobby for change or more investment |
| 41 | Produce and circulate briefing notes to agencies and communities |
| 25 | Provide an online discussion group on specific issues |

This shows that conferences were a popular function of the CRF.

Further consideration of this question is given in section 4.

In conclusion, public conferences were a popular function of the CRF and they provided useful information to, and feedback from, organisations and communities. It is difficult to demonstrate their cost-effectiveness, however, especially in the current economic climate. The loss of this function since 2013 has affected the way that the CRF and Business Group operates. It has become more difficult for the Group to prioritise topics, it lacks a focus for activity and the CRF no longer has a high profile among communities and organisations.

3.2 Rural Briefings

Rural Briefings used to be produced following conferences as a way of collating and disseminating information to a wider audience. They were usually prepared by Roger Roberts and published on the ACT website and sent to both ACT Supporters and CRF mailing lists.

Since the last CRF conference in 2013, the following Rural Briefings have been produced by ACT:

- The Rural Patient Transport briefing (2015) was in response to anecdotal evidence about duplication, overlap and confusion about services provided by different organisations. CRF is referred to only in the first paragraph of the paper, which starts, “ACT, working with Cumbria Rural Forum, has undertaken an exploration....”
- Three Affordable Warmth briefings (2015) were produced by ACT in partnership with Churches Together in Cumbria. The only reference to the CRF is in the page footer.
- The Climate Change and its Impacts briefing (2014) was also produced by ACT with no reference to the CRF except in the page footer.

These more recent briefings have been published under the ACT banner with the ACT logo and the heading ‘Rural Briefing’. They have “Cumbria Rural Forum - Rural Briefing” as a page footer. Older briefings from before January 2013 have a banner heading “Cumbria Rural Forum – Rural Briefing” and include the Cumbria Rural Forum logo but not the ACT logo.

The CRF survey attempted to explore whether the Rural Briefings were effective by asking how useful people found them and whether they had done anything different as a result.

Fifteen people answered the survey. Of the twelve people who said they had read a Rural Briefing, four said it was ‘very useful’, six said ‘quite useful’ and three said ‘a little useful’. In answer to the subsequent question, “Did you do anything different as a result?” only three people said yes, stating:

‘We have encouraged other areas to set up oil syndicates and promote community engagement with other groups.’

‘Used them to inform strategy.’

‘This is work CAFS carries out as part of their remit across Cumbria.’

As with conferences, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the Rural Briefings. Some, such as those on affordable warmth, could have made significant differences for individuals throughout the county but this is difficult to capture.

Dissemination of information appears to be a key function of the CRF, however, and Rural Briefings are a cost-effective way of achieving this. ACT has continued to prepare or commission relevant Rural Briefings in recent years.

3.3 Operation of the Business Group

The role of the Business Group is described in the paper produced in 2011³ on the ACT website as “to give leadership to and enable the successful operation of the Forum by:

- Planning its forward programme.
- Identifying new issues for discussion and opportunities to engage new partners.
- Contributing to Forum debates.
- Drawing together the Forums view(s) and advocating these to policy and strategy makers.”

Membership of the Business Group is described as being by invitation with the object of ensuring representation across a range of relevant sectors. It is said to currently comprise the following organisational and sectoral representatives:

ACT, Cumbria County Council, environment, land-based sector, NW Rural Affairs Forum, Cumbria Association of Local Councils and Cumbria Churches.

Interviews with members of the Business Group confirmed that their links with rural communities – both geographical and interest – are vital, with each member representing several communities of interest. They do not gather views in a formal or structured way to feed into the group, but rather by being a part of the community. ACT is represented on the Business Group and also provides important links with – and knowledge about – rural communities.

The information about CRF on the ACT website states that, as a part of its work, “the Business Group maintains and annually reviews an issues list (The Rural Challenge) that reflects the concerns of the Forum”. A paper, “The Rural Challenge in Cumbria”, was produced in 2010, but there has not been a documented annual review.

The operation of the CRF has changed since 2013 and this was reflected in interviews with members of the Business Group as described in 3.1 above. As a result, there was a general agreement amongst members that the membership and operation of the Business Group needs refreshing.

Suggestions included: clarifying what is expected of the Business Group members; either expanding the group or finding a way to encourage more regular attendance; having a core group with floating members or advisers for specific issues; carrying out an annual review of priority rural community issues and setting out a programme to tackle them; having ‘task and finish’ groups to deal with specific issues; raising the CRF profile, perhaps with a public event; and asking ‘members’ what they see as the current significant rural challenges.

The point was also made by one person that the Business Group works well because it has built up trust and can hold an open debate. Bringing in new members would have to be carefully thought through to attract the right people who ‘think community’.

³ ACTion with Communities in Cumbria 2011 *CRF CV*

3.4 Relationship between the CRF and ACT

The relationship between the CRF and ACT is described as follows:

“The work of the Forum is supported by a Business Group which is appointed by and reports to ACT’s Board. The administration and activities of both the Forum and Business Group are supported by ACT.”⁴

The Business Group is chaired by an ACT Trustee; and ACT’s Chief Executive sits on the group. This allows very good working links between the CRF and ACT.

The ACT Board receives reports but it has not appointed members of the Business Group. Rather, membership of the group is reviewed informally by ACT staff and the group itself; and personal contact made to invite appropriate members when there are gaps in representation.

In reality, the practical operation of the CRF is done by ACT. ACT arranges the meetings of the Business Group, feeds in community views gathered through its day-to-day work and then, whatever actions are decided by the Business Group, ACT implements them.

It is difficult to differentiate between what the CRF does and what ACT does. The first sentence on ACT’s website describing what it does says,

“ACT champions community and rural issues, we support communities to plan for their future, develop projects, work with others, and influence and change policy. We are particularly active in rural areas among communities affected by disadvantage whether this is economic, social or physical.”⁵

The operation of the CRF easily falls within ACT’s remit and indeed the Business Group relies upon ACT to deliver the CRF.

An example of this is that ACT has continued to produce Rural Briefings, feeding back to the CRF Business Group on progress rather than receiving instruction from it.

In interviews with the Business Group, members expressed the view that whatever the CRF does needs to fit in with ACT’s remit. CRF has not done anything that ACT would not do, but it is a way of engaging a wider group.

Some members of the group recognised that there is a resource issue for ACT, particularly as the budget has been reduced in recent years, saying that the Business Group relies on the goodwill of ACT to take up issues it identifies and it therefore needs to be selective.

Interviewees also highlighted that ACT has a good reputation and good links with the community and said that the CRF needs to build on both of those.

⁴ ACTion with Communities in Cumbria 2011 *CRF CV*

⁵ <http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk> accessed July 2016

Cumbria County Council provides funding to ACT for the Cumbria Rural Forum. Crucially, the funding in recent years has been provided as a support for “rural voice work” rather than for the “Cumbria Rural Forum”. The current annual budget is £6,000.

3.5 Conclusions on the Operation of the CRF

The following conclusions are drawn from this section on the operation of the CRF and Business Group:

- The need for a Cumbria Rural Forum is seen as greater now since there have been severe cuts to local authority and other budgets, with a deleterious effect on the delivery of rural services.
- The operation of the CRF has changed since 2013 and large conferences are no longer organised. Conferences are an expensive use of limited resources and it is difficult to assess their effectiveness.
- The conferences were popular and the feedback from attendees informed the Business Group of current issues and priorities and fed into the planning of the next event. This feedback loop has been lost. There does not appear to be a structured review of rural community issues to help prioritise the work of the group.
- The Rural Briefings have continued under the auspices of ACT. They appear to be a cost-effective way of collating and disseminating information on specific topics.
- The Business Group is intended to direct the work of the CRF, to be representative of different sectors and to be in touch with rural community views and issues. The role and membership of the Business Group currently needs to be reviewed.
- The public profile of the CRF has diminished.
- ACT has a high public profile, a good reputation and good links with rural communities.
- The functions of the CRF lie within ACT’s remit. ACT currently supports the Business Group and delivers the work of the CRF.
- In effect, the Business Group is a good way for ACT to widen the debate on rural community issues, to broaden representation to include, for example, land-based and environment sectors and, perhaps, to ground-truth its own knowledge and experience about what is current in rural communities.

4 Rural Community Issues and Priorities

4.1 Current Rural Community Issues

The opportunity was taken when carrying out the CRF survey and the Business Group interviews to query what people saw as the current priorities. In the survey, people were asked to rank the top five most pressing issues facing rural Cumbria today. The following scores are accumulated from the 15 answers, where the first priority scores 5, the second 4 and so on.

| Score | Issue |
|-------|--------------------------------|
| 53 | Access to services |
| 51 | Rural transport and fuel costs |
| 33 | Affordable housing |
| 25 | Age structure |
| 24 | Affordable energy and warmth |
| 19 | Flooding |
| 14 | Sparse populations |
| 6 | Low incomes |

'Access to services' was the top-scoring issue; it was ranked number 1 by 5 people and included in the top 5 issues by 14 of 15 respondents.

'Rural transport and fuel costs' scored almost as highly; it was ranked number 1 by 3 people and included in the top 5 issues by 14 of 15 respondents.

Interviews with Business Group members also highlighted the top three challenges as access to services, transport and fuel poverty, and housing. Others not on the list suggested by individuals on the group were broadband and mobile reception and migration to the county, particularly by older people.

Business Group members felt that the rural challenges haven't changed much over the past 5-10 years, partly because they are part of a much bigger picture. They felt that aspects or emphases within the priorities change, however, for example the recent loss of Cumbria Rural Housing Trust or the effect of recent right-to-buy legislation affecting affordable housing in rural areas. These aspects can become the focus of activity for the CRF.

The Rural Challenge in Cumbria⁶, which was written by Roger Roberts and published by the CRF in 2010, listed the key concerns in priority order (based on a poll of Cumbria Rural Forum participants) as:

- Accessibility
- Affordable housing
- Fuel poverty
- Age structure
- Sparsity and rurality
- Low incomes

⁶ Cumbria Rural Forum 2010 *The Rural Challenge in Cumbria*

Comparing that with the recent survey suggests that 'public transport and fuel poverty' has moved up the priorities; while 'affordable energy and warmth' and 'flooding' have entered the list. However, fuel poverty in the 2010 list also covered heating as well as transport.

Since 2010 there have been significant cuts in public transport and increasing flood events, which are reflected in the changing priorities.

ACT itself has compiled and commissioned other relevant reports since 2010, such as 'The State of Rural Cumbria' (2013) and 'Fuel Poverty Update' (2014).

In the CRF survey, people were asked, "Do you think the most pressing rural challenges have changed in the past 5-10 years? If yes, in what way? If no, why not?"

Ten people answered this question, seven of whom referred to cuts in budgets, for example:

"Cuts to local authority budgets have inevitably led to remote rural communities suffering more than the urban areas"

"Services provided by local authorities to rural areas have been greatly curtailed"

"I think issues around services and rural transport have been exacerbated over the last 5-10 years due to reduction in government funding for transport and services together with an aging population increasing demand for services"

"The challenges are probably the same – but the resources to deal with them have been severely cut".

Four of the comments made were about cuts in public transport; three about health service budgets; and three people mentioned flooding.

In conclusion, rural issues have not changed much over the past five years. Access to services, rural transport and affordable housing remain as key issues, but the challenges have increased due to budget cuts. There are changing aspects within these issues and potential responses that require a reactive approach, such as the recent loss of Cumbria Rural Housing Trust.

4.2 Prioritising CRF Actions

Given limited resources, it has been acknowledged that the CRF needs to be selective. This can mean both in terms of selecting the priority issues to deal with and in selecting the most cost-effective actions to take.

The three key current outward-facing actions of the CRF are to:

- Bringing agencies and communities together, e.g. at a conference or meeting
- Producing and circulating briefing notes to agencies and communities
- Advocacy or lobbying for change or more investment

Discussion with members of the Business Group revealed that they favoured the term ‘advocacy’ over ‘lobby’, partly because it is difficult to show they have a mandate for formal lobbying, such as to the government.

It was also recognised that this last function of the CRF was now very difficult, since there is no longer a simple ‘upward chain’ of communication. When the CRF was established, it was part of a network of fora that fed into a Regional Rural Forum, which had support from Government Office North-West and access to government ministers. This is no longer the case.

It was also noted by Business Group members that the CRF should not duplicate action that other organisations are taking, but there are occasions where adding the CRF voice to others and providing a broader input is useful.

The opportunity was taken in the CRF survey to ask respondents what they thought the CRF should do to tackle issues from a list of five tasks. These included the three tasks in the bullet points above and two others:

Encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities. This was added here because it was a significant feature of the most recent Rural Briefings. People are confused by the overlap between agencies offering support and services and would like help in finding the most appropriate sources of support.

Provide an online discussion group on specific issues. This was added as a suggestion from one of the Business Group members.

Scores are accumulated as follows, where the first priority scores 5, the second 4 and so on.

| | |
|----|--|
| 61 | Encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities |
| 51 | Bring agencies and communities together, e.g. at a conference or seminar |
| 47 | Lobby for change or more investment |
| 41 | Produce and circulate briefing notes to agencies and communities |
| 25 | Provide an online discussion group on specific issues |

The most popular function was to ‘encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities’. Its accumulated score was the highest and it was ranked number one by 7 of 15 respondents. It is not currently documented as a function of the CRF, but it was seen as one of the benefits that resulted from the conferences and meetings that it organised.

4.3 Conclusions on Priority Rural Issues and CRF Actions

- Rural issues have not changed much over the past five years. Access to services, rural transport and affordable housing remain as key issues, but the challenges have increased due to budget cuts.
- There are changing aspects within these issues and potential responses that require a reactive approach, for example the recent loss of Cumbria Rural Housing Trust or the effect of recent right-to-buy legislation on affordable housing in rural areas.
- In the survey, people thought the most important function of the CRF is to encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities.
- The other three current actions of the CRF were placed in this order of preference by the survey:
 - Bringing agencies and communities together, e.g. at a conference or seminar
 - Advocacy or lobbying for change or more investment
 - Producing and circulating briefing notes to agencies and communities
- A proposed online discussion forum on specific topics was the least popular action in the survey.
- Lobbying has become more difficult now that there is no longer a simple 'upward chain' of communication to the government.
- It was noted that the CRF should not duplicate action that other organisations are taking, but there are occasions where adding the CRF voice to others and providing a broader input is useful.

5. Summary Conclusions

5.1 Functions of the Cumbria Rural Forum

The Cumbria Rural Forum is a process which aims to:

- Collect views and information about current important issues affecting rural communities
- Debate and clarify the issues and explore potential solutions
- Use that information to inform and influence both policy-makers and community action
- Encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities

5.2 The Need for the CRF

The need for these CRF functions is perceived as having increased in recent years as a result of cuts to local authority and other budgets, which have had deleterious effects on the delivery of rural services.

5.3 Changing Operation of the CRF

- Public conferences were a popular activity of the Cumbria Rural Forum (CRF) until 2013 and they provided useful information to, and feedback from, organisations and communities. It is difficult to demonstrate their cost-effectiveness, however, especially in the current economic climate.
- The loss of this function has affected the way that the CRF and Business Group operates. It has become more difficult for the Group to prioritise topics and it lacks a focus for activity. The way that the CRF and Business Group operates needs to change to reflect this.
- The CRF has a much reduced profile among communities and organisations since the public conferences ceased.
- The current operation of the Business Group as a closed meeting is not effective and its role and membership needs to be reviewed.
- Rural Briefings remain a cost-effective way of disseminating information. The Business Group and CRF has not played a key role in recent Rural Briefings but ACT has continued to prioritise and prepare or commission relevant briefings in recent years.

Summary Conclusions (cont.)

5.4 Relationship between ACT and the CRF

- The relationship between ACT and the Cumbria Rural Forum is very close. They share the same remit to champion community and rural issues, particularly in rural areas among communities affected by disadvantage, whether this is economic, social or physical.
- ACT maintains a high profile, a good reputation and strong links to Cumbria communities.
- ACT oversees all aspects of the implementation of the Cumbria Rural Forum, including servicing the Business Group. ACT is ideally placed to lead on all of the CRF functions and indeed currently does so on behalf of the CRF.
- The CRF provides a format for ACT to widen the debate on rural community issues, to broaden representation and to ground-truth its own knowledge and experience about what is current in rural communities.

5.5 Rural Challenges

- Rural issues have not changed much over the past five years. Access to services, rural transport and affordable housing remain as key issues, but the challenges have increased due to budget cuts.
- There are changing aspects within these issues and potential responses that require a reactive approach. ACT is in a good position to respond to these challenges.

6. Recommendations

6.1 The role and functions of the CRF are re-defined as to:

- Collect views and information about current important issues affecting rural communities
- Debate and clarify the issues and explore potential solutions
- Use that information to inform and influence both policy-makers and community action
- Encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities

6.2 ACT takes a clear lead on the delivery of the CRF

This means that ACT will be directly responsible for the functions of the CRF rather than operating through – and servicing – a Business Group.

6.3 ACT establishes a ‘Cumbria Rural Panel’

The panel will be drawn from the current Business Group and CRF mailing list. It will have wider representation than the Business Group, but will be much smaller and more actively involved than the current CRF mailing list. The membership of the panel should aim to provide a balance of interests and expertise across different sectors.

What is expected of panel members is described in section 7.6. People on the CRF mailing list will be invited to either become active members of the panel or to remain as ACT supporters, who will continue to receive information.

Establishing a new panel will help to refresh the CRF and raise the profile.

6.4 ACT establishes processes to actively engage panel members

ACT will establish appropriate processes to engage the panel membership, including:

- At least one meeting per year to consider a review of the priorities and proposed actions for the coming year. ACT would draft a review of pressing rural issues before inviting participation from the group.
- At least four email consultations per year requesting views on priorities and/or specific topics.
- Other relevant periodic consultation, such as through posts on Facebook and ACT events.
- A panel blog site so that members can communicate with each other.
- ACT may call on relevant people within the membership to attend specific topic-based meetings or sub-groups to discuss and respond to emerging issues.

6.4 ACT establishes processes to actively engage panel members (cont.)

- ACT will work with agencies on the panel to co-ordinate and direct partnership working where appropriate.
- ACT will undertake a triennial review of the operation and membership of the panel to ensure that it remains effective.

6.5 ACT uses the panel views to inform Rural Briefings

ACT will maintain the roll-out of relevant Rural Briefings, based on information and feedback from the panel, and using its network of supporters to disseminate information. Briefings should continue to include an explanation of the role of different agencies to assist communities in finding the right support.

6.6 ACT uses the panel views to influence policy-makers

ACT will aim to influence policy-makers, on specific subjects agreed through the panel, through its association with Action with Communities in Rural England and other organisations.

6.7 ACT will maintain a clear identity for the 'Cumbria Rural Panel'

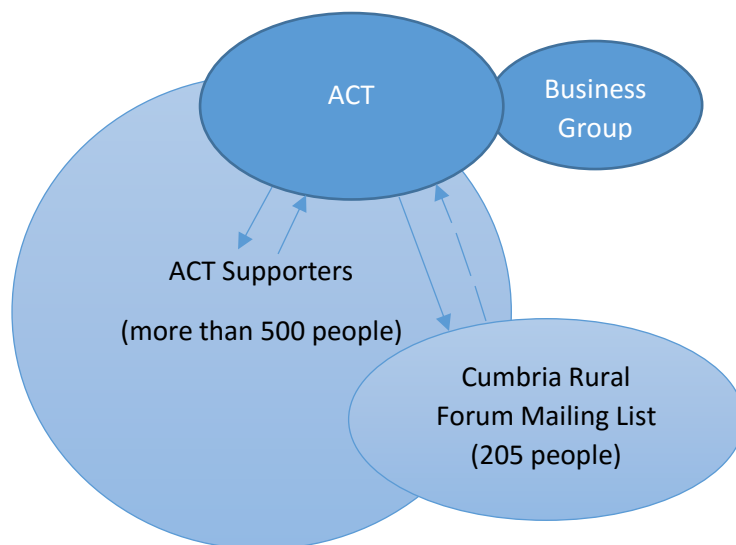
Although effectively brought within the auspices of ACT, the 'Cumbria Rural Panel' should maintain a separate identity that highlights its function in providing the 'rural voice' of Cumbria.

There is a risk that this rural voice role could become subsumed in the everyday operation of ACT. Clear roles for staff within ACT should be identified including leading on the operation of the panel; administration of meetings and communication; and reviewing and acting upon feedback from the panel.

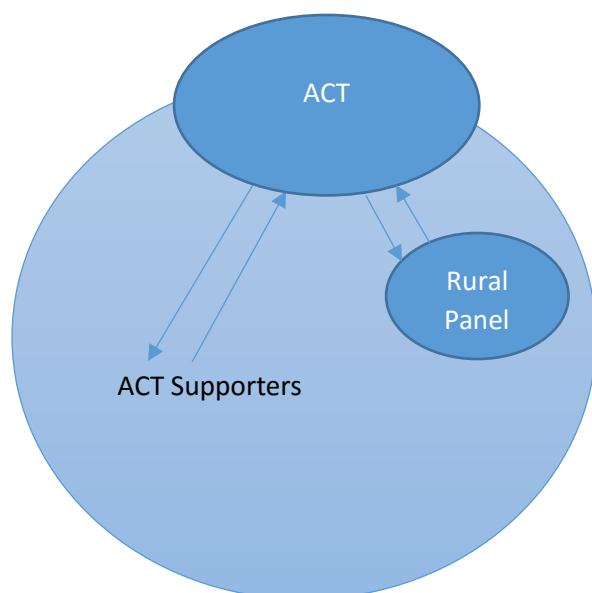
ACT should consider whether the panel should be a standing committee of ACT, as is the current Business Group, to maintain its independence.

7. Proposed Structure and Operation of the Cumbria Rural Panel

7.1 Current structure of the Cumbria Rural Forum



7.2 Proposed Structure of the Cumbria Rural Panel



The number of members on the Cumbria Rural Panel will depend on interest. It is estimated that around 50 people are likely to be interested, with perhaps 25 particularly active at any one time.

7.3 Description of the Cumbria Rural Panel

Subject to acceptance of the conclusions and recommendations included in this report, the following summary description of the Cumbria Rural Panel would appear on the ACT website:

ACT leads on the delivery of the Cumbria Rural Panel.

ACT champions community and rural issues, we support communities to plan for their future, develop projects, work with others, and influence and change policy. We are particularly active in rural areas among communities affected by disadvantage whether this is economic, social or physical.

The Cumbria Rural Panel helps ACT to gather information on pressing rural issues, to engage in meaningful debates to identify solutions, to disseminate information and to promote action.

7.4 Functions of the Cumbria Rural Panel

The Cumbria Rural Panel role and functions are defined as to:

- Collect views and information about current important issues affecting rural communities
- Debate and clarify the issues and explore potential solutions
- Use that information to inform and influence both policy-makers and community action.
- Encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities

7.5 How ACT delivers the Cumbria Rural Panel

ACT recruits the panel from the Business Group and current Cumbria Rural Forum Mailing List. It will engage the panel in the following ways:

- At least one meeting per year to consider a review of the priorities and proposed actions for the coming year. ACT would draft a review of pressing rural issues before inviting participation from the group.
- At least four email consultations per year requesting views on priorities and/or specific topics.
- Other relevant periodic consultation, such as through posts on Facebook and ACT events.
- A panel blog site so that members can communicate with each other.
- ACT may call on relevant people within the membership to attend specific topic-based meetings or sub-groups to discuss and respond to emerging issues.
- ACT will work with agencies on the panel to co-ordinate and direct partnership working where appropriate.
- ACT will undertake a triennial annual review of the operation and membership of the panel to ensure that it remains effective.

7.6 What is expected of members of the Cumbria Rural Panel

Members of the Cumbria Rural Panel may be expected to take part in the following activities, subject to their availability:

- Attend one annual meeting and be actively involved in reviewing the current rural issues and priorities for action.
- Respond to four emails per year, expressing views on specific rural issues.
- Use their knowledge and experience to inform ACT and other panel members about current rural issues.
- Where relevant, attend specific topic-based meetings to debate current or emerging issues and to identify potential solutions.
- Where relevant play an active part in a sub-group or 'task and finish group' on a specific topic.
- Work in partnership with others to ensure co-ordination rather than duplication of effort.
- Pro-actively engage with ACT and other panel members to provide a rural voice for Cumbria.

Appendix 1 Cumbria Rural Forum Survey Responses

July 2016

15 responses were received:

2 Cumbria County Council

1 LEADER

8 local groups/parish councils

2 larger community organisations

2 not organisations

1. What do you think are the top three most pressing issues facing rural Cumbria today?

Please rank your top five from the following

Scores are accumulated, where the first priority scores 5, the second 4 and so on.

53 Access to services

Ranked number 1 by 5 people and included in the top 5 by 14 of 15 respondents

51 Rural transport and fuel costs

Ranked number 1 by 3 people and included in the top 5 by 14 of 15

33 Affordable housing

25 Age structure

24 Affordable energy and warmth

19 Flooding

14 Sparse populations

6 Low incomes

Other – please state

Very difficult to rank these as they're all important and inter related.

Access to public access defibrillators, funding for these is very difficult to obtain and the issues surrounding VAT on ones placed for 'wider public use' is ridiculous

Access to services and rural transport and fuel costs both scored highly.

Affordable housing was the next priority.

2. The Cumbria Rural Forum has limited resources. How best can it help to tackle these issues?

Please rank in order of importance

Scores are accumulated, where the first priority scores 5, the second 4 and so on.

61 Encourage better partnership working between agencies and communities

Ranked number 1 by 7 of 15 respondents

51 Bring agencies and communities together, e.g. at a conference or seminar

47 Lobby for change or more investment

41 Produce and circulate briefing notes to agencies and communities

25 Provide an online discussion group on specific issues

Can you suggest other ways for the Rural Forum to tackle these issues?

Collect independent data as evidence for change

4. Do you think the most pressing rural challenges have changed in the past 5-10 years? If yes, in what way? If no, why not?

No because there has not been enough investment

Yes. Cuts to local authority budgets have inevitably led to remote rural communities suffering more than the urban areas given the lack of a coordinated voice. Unlike West Cumbria where for example they have acted vigorously to represent their health needs to the Success Regime. No such voice exists for East Cumbria at large.

The reduction of some services especially the Ambulance Service has put more onto volunteer organisations. The lack of funding for defibrillators is disgraceful.

The cuts to some services means support for the increasing problem of dementia, diabetes and obesity is diminishing which means the problems are snowballing into bigger issues for the future.

Transport sit getting worse & affordable housing likely to be under pressure very soon.

Lack of a sense of national responsibility for helping to provide these things.

Fewer young people and working age, more retired people and aged plus reductions in budgets for rural transport, health services etc

Yes. Services provided by local authorities to Rural areas have been greatly curtailed, some examples are maintenance of rural roads, poor supervision of work carried out by contractors. Regular maintenance of drains, culverts is almost non-existent and gives rise to local flooding on roads where it hasn't previously occurred. White lines at junctions, roundabouts etc - in some cases they have almost disappeared.

Rural people and others shopping in towns where parking charges are becoming obscene in some places. Why can't the large supermarkets pay a subsidy to town councils to subsidise parking in town centres or not fine people who overstay their stated hours while visiting a town centre.

No. Above all, isolation from services impacts most on disadvantaged groups in rural communities. The withdrawal of public transport from small isolated communities has had a huge impact. Because of the way existing public transport services are structured, I don't think possible solutions have been adequately explored.

Yes Flooding and lack of action by the Environment Agency

I think issues around access to services and rural transport have been exacerbated over the last 5-10 years due to reductions in government funding for transport and services together with an aging population increasing demand for services. Flooding continues to be a key issue in particular areas.

The challenges are probably the same - but the resources to deal with them has been severely cut. Evidence of climate change in the increase in major flooding in Cumbria has significantly increased. The need to deal with the deterioration and maintenance of traditional building stock when people are on reduced income and are living with increased fuel bills is a pressing challenge

Have you been to a conference organised by the Forum, such as Community Energy Champions or Community Tourism in Cumbria in 2013?

8 yes 6 no 1 don't know

5. If yes, how useful did you find it?

3 Very 5 quite useful

6. Did you do anything different as a result?

3 Yes 4 Not sure 1 No

If yes, please say what

Over the years in my role as a Village Agent for the Northern Fells Group we have implemented changes from ideas we have picked up from conferences we have attended

More alert to need.

Followed up on the Community Energy Champions work in Alston

7. Have you read any of the briefings produced by the Forum, such as Rural Patient Transport or the three Affordable Warmth briefings?

12 yes 1 Not sure 2 No

8. If yes, how useful did you find it?

4 Very 6 Quite 3 a little 0 not at all

9. Did you do anything different as a result?

3 Yes 7 No 3 Not sure

If yes, please say what

We have encouraged other areas to set up oil syndicates and promote community engagement with other groups

Used them to inform strategy

This is work CAFS carries out as part of their remit across Cumbria

Appendix 2 Combined Views of the Business Group Members

Business Group members were interviewed individually; their comments have been collated under the following headings.

What is the Cumbria Rural Forum?

Even amongst Business Group members, there was some confusion over the terms “forum” and “business group”. For some the terms were interchangeable; and one person thought that the latter was intended to represent businesses.

The ACT website states that “The Business Group’s role is to give leadership to and enable the successful operation of the Forum”, which suggests that ‘the Forum’ is an entity in its own right. The Forum, however, does not have a membership; rather it is a mailing list of contacts who have been to a CRF conference and/or expressed an interest in receiving Rural Briefing papers or other information.

Role of the Cumbria Rural Forum

The role of the Cumbria Rural Forum CRF is to identify rural community issues, to research and clarify them, to have an open debate with relevant people and organisations, and to inform and influence policy makers.

Some issues are taken forward by other organisations so the CRF does not need to be deeply involved, but there is some merit in adding the CRF voice to others and providing a broader input.

The CRF also plays an advocacy role but the ‘upward chain’ is not as clear as it used to be. There used to be a national network, with county forums feeding into a Regional Rural Forum, which had support from Government Office North West. The chair of the Regional Rural Forum met with government ministers. This link with the government no longer exists.

Some Business Group members questioned whether CRF has a lobbying role and how does it get a mandate?

All Business Group members felt that the CRF still has an important role, especially now that public agencies’ resources have been cut.

Operation of the CRF

The operation of the CRF and the Business Group has changed, due in part to a diminished budget. The Business Group used to organise a programme of conferences. It would map rural issues, decide on priorities and organise conferences or meetings accordingly. This has not happened in recent years. (The last conference was in 2013).

People who had been members of the Business Group when there were CRF conferences felt it was more effective then. Conferences were well-attended and there were lively debates. One person, however, questioned whether they simply confirmed the views of those attending rather than effecting change.

When the Business Group organised conferences, there was regular feedback from delegates on future issues/priorities that they would like to see considered. More public-facing activity and engagement led to more feedback and enabled the Business Group to review priorities at regular intervals. Without this, it is difficult for the Group to prioritise topics and organise meetings or conferences accordingly.

There seems to be fewer meetings of the Business Group with less members attending. There is a risk of losing momentum. The current way it is operating, mostly as a closed-door discussion, feels less effective.

The Rural Briefings were prepared by Roger Roberts following on from the conferences. They are published on the ACT website and sent to CRF and ACT members. More recently, since January 2013, they have been published under the ACT banner with the ACT logo and the heading 'Rural Briefing'. All have "Cumbria Rural Forum - Rural Briefing" as a page footer, some have direct reference to CRF; others do not.

Older briefings from before January 2013 have a different banner heading "Cumbria Rural Forum – Rural Briefing" and include the Cumbria Rural Forum logo but not the ACT logo.

Refreshing the Business Group

There was a general agreement amongst members that the membership and operation of the Business Group needs refreshing.

Suggestions included: clarifying what is expected of the Business Group members; either expanding the group or finding a way to encourage more regular attendance; having a core group with floating members or advisers for specific issues; carrying out an annual review of priority rural community issues and setting out a programme to tackle them; having 'task and finish' groups to deal with specific issues; raising the CRF profile, perhaps with a public event; and asking 'members' what they see as the current significant rural challenges.

Those people who were members of the Business Group when it operated by identifying and prioritising issues and organising conferences believe that was a more effective way for the CRF to operate.

The point was also made by one person that the Business Group works well because it has built up trust and can hold an open debate. Bringing in new members would have to be carefully thought through to attract the right people who 'think community'.

Relationship with ACT

CRF is described as an independent body facilitated by ACT, but the relationship between the CRF and ACT seems unclear.

Business Group members expressed views that whatever the CRF does needs to fit in with ACT's remit. CRF has not done anything that ACT would not do but it is a way of engaging a wider group.

ACT has a good reputation and good links with the community and the CRF needs to build on both of those.

Resources

The budget for ACT and CRF has been reduced over recent years. The CRF relies on the goodwill of ACT to take up issues that the CRF identifies and it therefore needs to be selective.

There is a resource issue for ACT – does it have the resources to take up the challenges that CRF identifies? One person suggested that the CRF should consider whether it can generate paying work for ACT.

Business Group members all felt that there is definitely a role for CRF. The need is greater now than ever – rural communities are getting decreasing attention/officer time from public agencies. The question is how to deliver effectively for maximum impact at minimum cost.

Relationship with the Community

The Business Group is seen as the link with rural communities, with each member representing several communities of interest and gathering views not in a formal structured way but rather by being within the community. ACT also provides important links with the rural communities.

Feeding back to the community is done through the Rural Briefings.

Current challenges

The rural challenges haven't changed much over the past 5-10 years because they are part of a much bigger picture. The main current challenges are still access to services, transport and fuel poverty, housing and, more recently broadband and mobile reception.

One person added that now that there is no longer a Cumbria Rural Housing Trust, who will fulfil that role?

One person suggested that migration is a key issue of rising importance in rural Cumbria. This is not only about immigrants from other countries but people from other UK counties, such as retirees and older relatives whose families are looking for cheaper care. It will affect housing, transport etc. How might this increase and changing population structure affect communities? What can they do to plan for and cope with it?

Although the issues have not changed much, there are different aspects to well-known topics such as the effect of right-to-buy legislation on rural housing; or the recent demise of the Cumbria Rural Housing Trust.