



Operating Plan

April 2026 – March 2029

Community Action Northumberland

UNIUN Enterprise Building, Front Street, Pegswood, Morpeth, Northumberland, NE61 6UF

<http://ca-north.org.uk/>

Introduction

This Operating Plan covers the 3-year period to March 2029. It is a tool:

- Within our organisation, to enable our Board and staff to remain focused on our purpose, providing the framework for current and potential services and activities.
- For the benefit of our beneficiaries and partners, to communicate and clarify our purpose and priorities for the years ahead.

The Operating Plan is reviewed annually, always looking ahead 3 years. Our Vision and Purpose were reviewed in 2024 and are set out below.

Our vision

Rural communities in Northumberland will be vibrant, inclusive, sustainable and resilient.

Our purpose

We aim to:

- Promote Rural Issues – Providing and supporting a ‘rural voice’ to influence policy, programmes and action.
- Empower Communities – Supporting and developing local communities, their key groups and organisations.
- Deliver Solutions – Identifying, developing and managing projects to address the needs of individuals.

Our guiding principles

- A consistent and absolute commitment to rural communities.
- Working with integrity, openness and a genuine passion to support Northumberland’s rural communities.
- Being flexible and responsive to change.
- Being clearly opposed to all kinds of discrimination.

How we work:

We work proactively and reactively to achieve our vision and purpose for rural communities by:

- Listening to what they tell us.
- Publicising rural issues.
- Anticipating future problems.
- Enabling and empowering communities and individuals.
- Promoting exemplars.
- Demonstrating equality to all.
- Assessing our impact and continually learning as an organisation.
- Embracing team working, maximising shared skills and experience.
- Strengthening our efficacy through targeted collaboration.

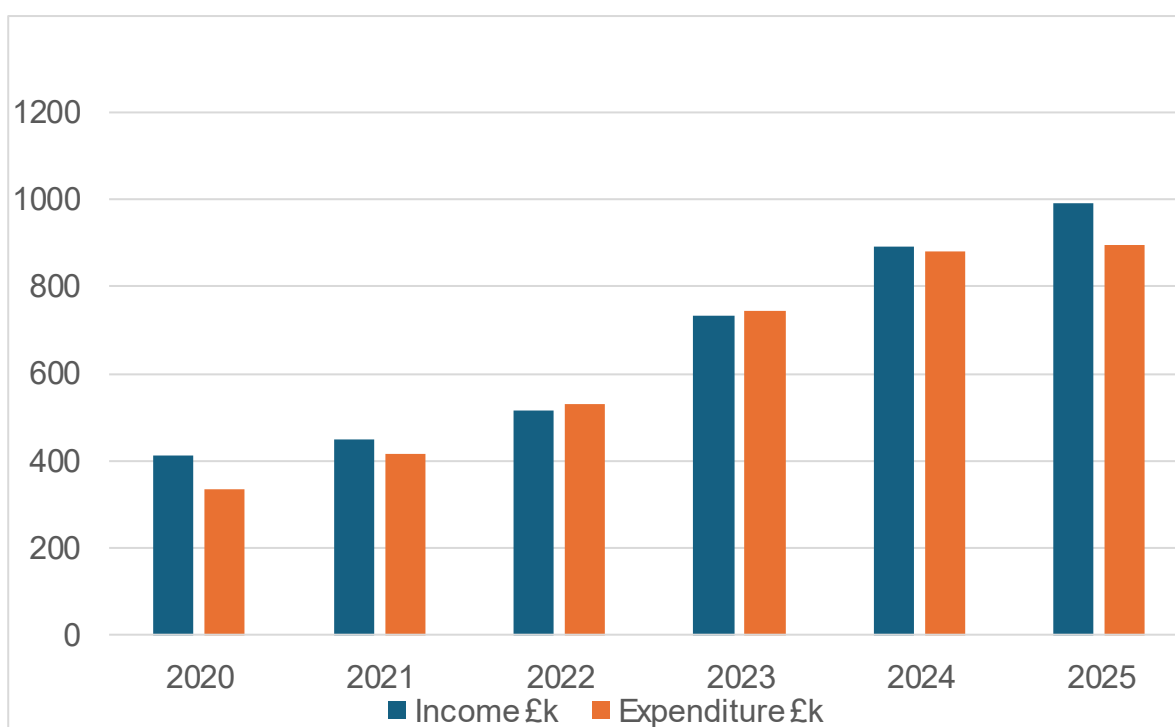
Working alongside organisations at all levels, from influencing policy to taking direct action, CAN makes a difference.

Operating Environment

The list of significant events impacting on all areas of life, on all communities and on all organisations grows with each passing year. Continually declining public sector funds have stretched many services to breaking point with rural needs and issues frequently ignored. The need to make the case for rural areas in the face of these challenges is ever more urgent.

Despite the tumultuous environment, CAN has been and remains determined to maintain and improve further our support for Northumberland's rural communities. We have:

- **Enhanced our staffing complement** – as a small charity, our staff are our key resource. Without them we can deliver nothing. During the Covid pandemic, for example, we did not furlough any staff. Whilst this would have assisted CAN's financial position by reducing direct costs, it would have led to a reduction in services at the very time when they were needed most. In subsequent years we have invested in additional staff in order to support more delivery activity. This represents a statement of extreme confidence in CAN by our funders and partners. It also reflects investment of our own reserves, generated through previous years' surpluses.
- **Maintained a strong financial position** – despite external funding constraints, our income and expenditure levels have continued to grow as the true value of our services and our impact is increasingly recognised. Our financial management is robust, and our income streams are diverse.



- **Embraced blended working** – all staff are equipped to work from home or work from our office base in Pegswood which acts as a resource centre, meeting space and hot desk facility. Reducing the requirement for unnecessary travel to the office has led to enhanced working and a significant reduction in carbon emissions. It has also improved

our ability to represent rural communities at a strategic level. The office space remains essential, however, to enable teams to come together and maintain a level of face-to-face contact.

- **Critically review our policies** – CAN’s board review and update all our policies on a minimum three-year cycle (annually with respect to safeguarding and reserves policies).
- **Maintained and adapted our existing services** – CAN’s staff have worked incredibly hard to continually refine and develop our services to deliver what is needed in the best way possible.
- **Developed new services** – the events of recent years have further highlighted the breadth and depth of community needs but also demonstrated a range of opportunities to initiate new approaches to delivery. Community resilience in the face of power and communication disruptions, fuel poverty, the preponderance of low incomes in rural areas and digital exclusion have all been thrown into sharper focus. Local access to essential services in sparsely populated areas remains a key conundrum for all service providers. Within this context, CAN has developed new solutions and activities in a number of areas which will act as a springboard for our activities during the period of this Operating Plan.

Within this ever-changing and challenging operating environment, a number of core strengths enable CAN to stand out from the crowd:

- CAN’s resilience, adaptability and sustainability have been demonstrable throughout the events of recent years. During these turbulent times, CAN has expanded rather than contracted. Whilst the financial and funding environment is increasingly challenging, this represents a significant strength on which we aim to build.
- We are part of a unique national network of 38 local charities committed to supporting rural communities across the whole of England – the ACRE Network (Action with Communities in Rural England). This provides an ongoing opportunity for CAN, as a local organisation, to make an impact at national level, work collaboratively with Network partners and to secure funds from national sources for delivery in Northumberland.
- We have an ongoing financial relationship with the Government, along with all 38 ACRE Network members in England. Core grant from Defra has been retained in recognition of the critical services we provide to rural communities.
- CAN’s financial relationship with the Northumberland Association of Local Councils (NALC) is robust and encapsulated within a three-year Memorandum of Understanding. This relationship brings significant benefits to both organisations and delivers a highly valued service across Northumberland and Newcastle.
- We have a diverse range of income sources meaning that we are not dependent on any one source. Income from contracts, direct service provision, consultancy, projects and grants has covered our costs over the last ten-year period and enabled an expansion in our staffing capacity. Despite the pandemic, national events, and the contraction of



some funding sources as a result of leaving the European Union, as we start the 2026/27 year, CAN remains financially robust providing strong foundations from which to build.

- Village halls and community buildings have always been at the heart of CAN. We have strong links with the two Consortia in the west and north of the County that represent a network of over 120 village halls and community buildings. Our partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund is strong with our wraparound and comprehensive capital support service growing in recent years in collaboration with our ACRE Network partners in Durham and Cumbria.
- We have developed a range of hugely successful initiatives which provide robust platforms for future development. For example: our Warm Hubs are thriving and provide the base from which to reach out further; Communities CAN is the recognised hub for community-led housing support across the North East; our village hall partnership with the National Lottery was the first of its kind in the country; in partnership with Newcastle University, our private sector funded Rural Digital Inclusion Project is developing well. Our Rural Employment Hubs are desperately needed by the many people out of work in rural Northumberland. However, they are under significant threat due to lack of funding availability. We are committed to finding the best way to ensure employability services are available to rural residents.
- We are a leader in relation to rural energy and climate action. We are engaged in a wide range of activities at both community and strategic levels aiming to reduce energy costs, increase community resilience and lower carbon emissions. In 2024 we led a partnership with Durham Community Action, the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise and the Rural Design Centre in securing £1.3 million from the Climate Action Fund of the National Lottery Community Fund. Our CAIRN programme (Climate Action In the Rural Northeast) runs for four years and encompasses a range of activities designed to support rural communities, organisations and residents in a just transition to net zero. We have established significant expertise in delivering energy advice and we were the founding partner in the creation of Northumberland Community Energy Ltd (NCEL).
- Our relationship with Northumberland County Council and other strategic organisations has developed significantly over recent years through direct contract, day-to-day dialogue and project development. A strong and positive relationship with the Council and other key organisations is essential to our continued success.
- We have nurtured our relationship with the new North East Combined Authority and the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal based on the strong synergy between the rural aspirations of these deals and our extensive and respected expertise with respect to rural communities, rural needs and solutions.
- We have strong relationships with both the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE), led by Newcastle University, and the Rural Design Centre enabling CAN to directly support both initiatives in bringing real benefit to communities and businesses in rural Northumberland.



Rural Need

'Severe isolation, ever declining access to services, an increasingly top-heavy age profile, significant low pay and limited employment opportunities present massive issues for many people living in rural Northumberland. The superficial gloss of affluence masks the reality of rural life for significant numbers of people in need.' **CAN Business Plan, March 2016**

CAN has an ongoing desire to clearly understand and highlight the needs which exist in rural Northumberland. This is both to act as a focus for our own work but also, critically, to influence funders and policymakers who often do not see beneath the apparent superficial gloss of prosperity, particularly evidenced in house prices, which is perceived in most rural areas.

The excellent strategic and analytical work of organisations such as Northumberland County Council, the Community Foundation, Newcastle University and our national partners, contribute significantly to understanding rural needs.

In 2024, the North East Combined Authority (NECA) led the preparation of a 'North East Environmental Stewardship, Coast and Rural Growth Investment Plan' for the region's rural and coastal areas. An evidence review in support of the Plan was prepared by the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE) at Newcastle University. This provides a useful compendium of available data for rural Northumberland within a North East context and is available at: [nicre-evidence-review-north-east-combined-authority-environment-stewardship-coast-and-rural-growth-investment-plan-june-2024.pdf](#)

Nationally, organisations including the Rural Services Network (RSN), Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), ACRE and others undertake rurally based research which serves to highlight rural issues and rural needs. For example, in 2022 a report prepared by Pragmatix research for RSN demonstrated that 'Were England's rural communities a distinct region, their need for Levelling Up would be greater than that of any other part of the country.'

Through ACRE and our close relationship with NICRE, RSN and other nationally based organisations, CAN maintains a close view of all such research for use locally. We aim to disseminate this information through our local networks and our fortnightly CAN e-news bulletin as a mechanism to continually highlight rural need – and opportunity.

Our various projects and services generate rich local information demonstrating rural need in Northumberland and, wherever possible, we seek to utilise the services of embedded evaluation partners within specific programmes both to support programme development and also to draw out key lessons and evidence of need. We also commission specific research where resources allow. In recent years this has included:

- [Community Spaces Partnership](#)
- [Community-led housing in Northumberland](#)
- [Nature Returns - Nature for People and Place in the Wansbeck catchment](#)
- [Rural business perspectives on Northumberland's housing needs](#)
- [Rural Housing Enabler programme](#)

We are also part of current Defra-funded research into the value of the community-led approach of the ACRE Network. This includes a deep dive into our energy work and is due to report in 2026.

Through access to national and regionally based information sources, our own work, events and by capturing the experiences of local organisations and individuals on the ground we aim to maintain a living view of rural need.

Key identified areas of rural need include:

- Hidden and dispersed poverty
- Lack of affordable housing
- Low pay and poverty in work
- Lack of transport, childcare, and other services
- Digital access, broadband and mobile signal infrastructure
- Fragile, and sometimes non-existent, energy infrastructure
- Out-migration of young people
- Increased cost of service delivery
- Difficulty in accessing centralised services
- The impacts of an ageing population
- Lower take-up of benefits
- Detachment from labour markets
- Isolation and loneliness for people in various groups and at various ages
- Fuel poverty
- Low availability of many household service providers and contractors
- Lack of a 'voice' for young people
- Attitudes and perceptions – belief in 'rural idyll' prevents recognition of others' disadvantage
- Health and wellbeing

Following the various crises of recent years, rural need has never been greater or more evident. However, it is a constant challenge to ensure that policymakers and funders recognise and understand this need. The 2025 refresh of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) helpfully includes a Rural Report exploring what deprivation looks like specifically in rural areas and how it can be better measured – but IMD still overlooks much of the hidden hardship in rural Northumberland. Unfortunately, we see many examples of funding decisions which only reflect high level IMD statistics. This has to change and, along with ACRE and other rural advocates, we will continue to strive to this end.

The challenge laid down for CAN is to work to address the needs which exist – in partnership with other organisations and with communities. This is the reason we were established in 1951 – and the reason we continue.



Principal Areas of Work

1. Promoting Rural Issues – Providing and supporting a ‘rural voice’ to influence policy, programmes and action

ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England)

Through ACRE, we will continue to respond to relevant national consultations with a collective network voice from across rural England. We will provide direct responses to national requests for information on specific issues to inform ACRE participation in a range of national forums, government roundtables and other mechanisms in a robust attempt to influence policy and programme development to better reflect rural needs and opportunities.

Within the region, we will maintain our close relationship with our north east ACRE Network partner, Durham Community Action, to reflect a cohesive rural community voice across the North East. Through ACRE, and directly, we will also feed into the work undertaken nationally by other rural advocates, including the Rural Services Network, continually making the case for fair investment and consideration for rural areas.

Defra (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs)

CAN is funded by Defra to help address the most prevalent issues affecting the sustainability of rural communities. These are set out by Defra as follows:

- Digital infrastructure
- Digital skills and inclusion
- Rural life opportunities (childcare, education, health, skills, loneliness, poverty & wellbeing)
- Social infrastructure (including village halls & community buildings)
- Rural transport
- Net zero and affordable energy
- Housing and planning
- Business support and social enterprise development

All ACRE Network partners, including CAN, report directly to Defra on their performance across these areas each quarter. An impact report is produced by ACRE, demonstrating the breadth of interventions undertaken and the outcomes achieved. We will provide robust information through this mechanism reflecting the needs evidenced through our work.

We will also build on the outcomes of the research commissioned by Defra in 2025 to explore how community-led approaches can address rural policy challenges, through a series of case studies – which included CAN.

Voluntary & Community Sector

CAN is a member of VONNE (Voluntary Organisations Network North East) and actively participates in a range of activities. This includes the Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIO) network for the region and the Voluntary Sector Leadership Board which endeavours to coordinate sector engagement with NECA.

The ‘Thriving Together Northumberland’ initiative is funded through Northumberland County Council as a mechanism to seek closer collaboration across the voluntary sector in the county. CAN participates in this network at a variety of levels in an attempt to ensure rural perspectives are effectively represented.

We will continue our targeted engagement, ensuring rural needs and opportunities are represented.

Local & Combined Authorities

Through our local networks and links with other organisations at a variety of levels, we seek to gather intelligence and understand local issues. We maintain good relationships with Northumberland County Council as a critical conduit of information to influence policy and programmes. We work with the North East Combined Authority (NECA) and have established direct links on key service areas, including housing and net zero. At the invitation of NECA, we directly participate in the following groups:

- Home to the Green Energy Revolution Portfolio Advisory Board
- North East Warmer Homes Taskforce
- North East Coast and Rural Taskforce
- North East High Streets Commission

We will seek to enhance this engagement into the future as new NECA and County Council programmes and strategies are developed.

National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE) and the Rural Design Centre (RDC)

We have worked very closely with both NICRE, led by Newcastle University, and RDC since their inception in relation to developing and implementing project activity, and in demonstrating and sharing good practice. Demonstrating what works well is a powerful way to influence others and to enhance the rural voice. The NICRE Innovation Portal is a growing resource doing just that which includes a number of joint projects delivered with CAN. Our relationship also enables us to access the networks of both organisations with respect to influencing policy and programmes at national and regional levels and it provides both partners with a trusted local delivery mechanism. We will seek to further enhance these relationships over the coming years.

Communications

After utilising the services of a professional marketing consultant for a number of years, in 2025 CAN invested in a permanent role of Communications Manager. The purpose is to ensure that our work is fully promoted, maximising the impact of what we do. This includes through our websites (CAN; Parish & Town Council portal; Village halls portal; Warm Hubs toolkit; EARN – Energy Advice in Rural Northumberland), social media, press releases and our series of regular newsletters including the fortnightly CAN e-news and CosyCAN targeted at Warm Hub users. A comprehensive review of our communications is underway during 2026/27 led by the Communications Manager and a joint trustee/staff working group. This will be implemented from 2026 onwards.

Evidence base

We will seek to consolidate information from all areas of CAN's work to build a strong and ongoing evidence base as a platform for communication and policy influence. We will explore new ways to utilise this evidence to support effective strategic 'rural proofing.' We will also use this information to further explore key areas of rural need – including transport, connectivity, and the needs of young people – to identify areas where CAN could make a positive contribution.

2. Empowering Communities – Supporting and developing local communities, their key groups and organisations

Village halls and community buildings.

We have been supporting village halls and community buildings since we were formed in 1951. Around 250 community buildings exist across Northumberland offering vital facilities for community activities. Throughout the year we will:

- Support management committees in one-to-one case work, good practice resources, Hallmark quality assessments, training, funding bids, capital and other projects as appropriate and within available capacity. We will continue to work closely with Northumberland's two village hall consortia in the North and West of the county and support them with any future changes. We will continue to explore additional funding mechanisms to enable us to maintain our essential community buildings service into the future and we will promote the importance of village halls through opportunities such as #VillageHallsWeek.
- We will maintain our excellent relationship with the National Lottery Community Fund and seek a further extension to our 'Community Spaces Partnership' initiative across Northumberland, Durham and Cumbria in partnership with Durham Community Action and Action with Communities in Rural Cumbria (ACT). Over the four-year period up to March 2027 this will have seen £3 million invested into development and support of community buildings across the three counties. NICRE has supported our learning throughout the each phase of the project and will be a continuing partner in the planned extension to ensure refinement of our approach, learning across the three counties, and clear demonstration of impact.
- We will maintain the Northumberland Village Halls Portal as an online access point for individuals and strategic service providers to the wealth of local venues across the rural county.
- We will work in partnership with NICRE to deliver our Rural Digital Inclusion project. The project is supported by partners including Northumberland County Council and Commsworld as part of a 20-year programme of investment in digital infrastructure. By late 2026, more than 120,000 residential and business properties, including in the most rural areas, will be able to get faster, more reliable connectivity. The Rural Digital Inclusion project works alongside the installation of new digital infrastructure. We'll help people living in rural areas of Northumberland to get full value from the

changes by providing practical support to help people use technology in their daily lives (through the recruitment, training and management of local Digital Champions, supporting events and activities at village halls), working with partners across Northumberland and beyond so that new initiatives complement and build on what is already available to support digital inclusion. We'll also be capturing feedback and learning throughout to develop a blueprint for rural digital inclusion for other communities and local and regional policymakers.

- We will support the operation and development of Northumberland Community Energy Ltd. NCEL has been created as a not-for-profit Community Benefit Society operating as a cooperative with any surplus revenue generated being used to further the organisation's objectives:
 - support the member community buildings on the transition to net zero
 - reduce energy bills of community building members
 - enhance the ability of community buildings acting as Community Resilience Hubs and Emergency Rest Centres when mains power is interrupted.

We will employ the Project Manager on behalf of NCEL, ensuring direct links to our other community building and net zero activities, and provide management and financial support including leading funding applications and implementation. NCEL aims to install solar panels and associated battery storage to 100 community buildings by 2029 and is a unique approach nationally. We will work with NICRE and RDC to promote learning from the NCEL model across the country and, specifically, in Durham through our award of funds from the National Lottery Community Fund's Climate Action Fund which also directly supports the Project Manager costs.

- We will support village halls to undertake holistic approaches to energy and net zero, supporting them to implement recommendations from environmental audits, building on our extensive experience over a number of years, and directly linking into NCEL activities as appropriate. This will be delivered through a dedicated Community Buildings Energy Adviser.

Community-led development

Community-led development is a success story in Northumberland and has been supported by CAN over many years. We will continue this support with specific focus on our strengths and expertise as follows:

- **Community-Led Housing.** Utilising funds made available by Northumberland County Council from its allocation of the government's Community Housing Fund, CAN established a community-led housing hub – 'Communities CAN (North East) Ltd' in 2018. This has grown to become the hub for the whole North East and in 2025 transitioned to a fully independent Community Interest Company (CIC). The hub aims to ensure that the support required by individual communities and organisations to deliver their own affordable



housing (either directly or in partnership with Housing Association or other organisation) is available and to identify and implement specific opportunities.

We will continue to provide administration and financial services to Communities CAN through a Service Level Agreement and ensure support to community-led housing activity in Northumberland is effective. Core activities for Communities CAN over the next period will include:

- Negotiation with NECA regarding future housing strategy in the region and the ongoing role for Communities CAN.
 - Maintaining support for community organisations across the region in developing community-led housing.
 - Establishing a direct role for Communities CAN in delivery of community-led housing.
 - Work with national partners to seek additional government funding to support community-led housing initiatives on the ground.
- **Community Energy.** The fragility of energy infrastructure in rural Northumberland, the prevalence of oil use as a mechanism for heating off-gas grid properties and the volatility of insecure energy supplies makes the generation of energy close to communities a significant priority for our communities. We will support the development and implementation of community energy schemes in the county through our CAIRN programme. This will include taking forward proposals to explore district heating and other collaborative options in Northumberland's smaller rural communities to complement similar work underway in larger settlements led by Northumberland County Council. We will support the utilisation of 'Community Carbon Assessments' in two communities per annum, as a mechanism for establishing the baseline position in relation to energy use and carbon emissions to support behavioural change and the development of collaborative solutions across a range of technologies.
 - **Development Trusts and associated organisations.** We will seek to continue close working with Development Trusts on specific activities, including hosting project officer services at Development Trusts where this helps them to operate effectively and to develop their activities and working in partnership on specific local priorities.

Parish and Town Councils

Through our partnership with the Northumberland Association of Local Councils (NALC) we will enable the provision of a holistic service to Parish and Town Councils through employment of the NALC Chief Officer and provision of administration and financial services. Through the Chief Officer this will include advice, training and effective communication through media such as the NALC e-news. We will seek to renew our Memorandum of Understanding with NALC at least every 3 years.

Nature for people and place

Over the last two years we have supported two research projects led by NICRE which have sought to test a new approach to bringing the voices of people and communities into planning and delivery of environmental stewardship, in order to achieve socioeconomic and environmental outcomes at the same time. These have related to two river catchment areas – the Wansbeck and the Coquet. This has demonstrated a clear evidence base for how environmental and socioeconomic objectives are connected, together with the extensive passion and localised activity which exists to build on. With our partners at NICRE we will look for ways to take the research findings forward, connecting more communities to the nature and landscapes that surround them.

3. Delivering solutions – Identifying, developing and managing projects to address the needs of individuals

The challenges for public and voluntary bodies and businesses to provide and sustain effective, good-quality services have always been a familiar feature of rural life. This has been brought into still sharper focus by events of recent years and the resulting impacts. In Britain’s predominantly urban society, and in a time of continuing economic restraint, new solutions are often needed specifically to meet the needs and circumstances of rural communities. Throughout our 75-year history, we have promoted and/or directly run a large number of rurally focused solutions. Subject to opportunity and available resource, we continually develop and operate a range of initiatives, in close partnership with other bodies.

Warm Hubs

This project, piloted by CAN in 2015, has been rolled out to support people living across rural Northumberland and is hugely successful. Warm Hubs are places within the local community where people can be assured of finding a safe, warm and friendly environment in which to enjoy refreshments, social activity, information, advice and the company of other people. Every venue that joins the scheme is asked to undergo an assessment to ensure that the service they offer meets a minimum standard. Reaching this standard entitles them to call themselves a ‘Warm Hub’ and to use the Warm Hub logo which has been trademarked by CAN. Over 50 Warm Hubs exist across Northumberland all locally managed and supported by CAN.



Interest in ‘Warm Spaces’ across the UK grew exponentially during the ongoing and now dramatically worsening energy crisis and resulted in a wide range of venues being made available for people to use. Northumberland’s Warm Hubs provide a holistic and distinctive approach to supporting warmth and tackling isolation, and we have been keen to ensure this approach is not diluted. We secured resources from Northern Gas Networks to establish a ‘Warm Hubs Toolkit’ to encapsulate our approach and to help guide other organisations through the process of establishing themselves as a Warm Hub if they desire.

Priorities during this Operating Plan include supporting the ongoing management and development of Warm Hubs in Northumberland, ensuring that they continue to be integrated with other activities as funds allow, reflecting the value of the initiative in relation to a wide range of issues including isolation, health and fuel poverty. We will continue to utilise Warm Hubs as venues to share information and support in relation to our other activities and will maintain our support for the associated network of Community Energy Agents – volunteers, trained by CAN. We will seek funds wherever possible to support Warm Hubs in Northumberland.

Rural Employment Hubs

Building on the success of our Rural Employment Hubs over several years, we successfully joined the countywide Bridge Project in 2018 which ran until March 2023. This was immediately followed by a scaled down initiative – ‘Solid Foundations’ – funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) from April 2023 until March 2025, delivering employability support to economically inactive people across the county. This was subsequently extended to March 2026 with, again, significantly reduced ‘Transitional’ funding, through NECA.

The project has been tremendously successful in achieving targets and the partnership of VCS organisations involved has grown in strength and reputation. The project delivers support to unemployed people across the county and CAN’s role is to ensure this reaches into the rural areas of Northumberland. We have delivered the service at Alnwick, Amble, Haltwhistle, Hexham, Morpeth and Prudhoe as well as supporting an aligned hub in partnership with Glendale Gateway Trust and Bellview.

However, despite this success, there will not be funding available through this route from April 2026. Mainstream funds routed through the Combined Authority are being targeted at a number of ‘Trailblazer’ activities which focus on specific groups of people in need. It remains to be seen whether these are able to reach out to rural communities in practice. Economically inactive residents living in rural areas face huge challenges in accessing support services without some form of dedicated rural outreach and rural delivery.

We will endeavour to hold providers of the trailblazer programmes to account in relation to the extent they reach rural residents. We will also explore alternative funding to enable an additional and bespoke rural outreach service to be delivered through a proposed Rural Inclusion Network, drawing in specialist services from other funded programmes and preventing rural residents being further disadvantaged. As part of this approach, we will explore opportunities to facilitate training and employment opportunities in the energy and net zero sector, a key growth area for Northumberland.

Energy and net zero

Through our CAIRN programme (Climate Action in the Rural Northeast), we have secured funding over the four-year period to August 2028 to maintain a core service delivering domestic carbon reduction advice to households across rural Northumberland. This builds on the huge success of our Energy Advice programmes delivered since 2021 with funding

through the Energy Industry Voluntary Redress scheme. The funding for CAIRN will maintain our core expertise in this area and enable us to participate in wider programmes of advice and support developed by NECA and central government. This includes the Home Energy Advice North East programme (March 2024 to July 2025) and its successor, the North East Warmer Homes programme (December 2025 to March 2027) led by the Energy Saving Trust and which uses CAN as the local delivery partner.

In 2025 we secured additional resources to specifically focus on supporting households in Northumberland who are not even connected to the electricity grid. From an energy perspective, these households represent the extreme level of need across the country.

We will seek to enable such programmes to reach into every corner of rural Northumberland through our fully trained staff. We will:

- Deliver trusted independent carbon reduction advice and support to rural households which face the most challenging response to the removal of fossil fuels.
- Deliver information and advice through our network of Warm Hubs and the volunteers involved in each hub on energy efficiency, alternative energy sources, using slow cookers as a mechanism to reduce energy usage and bills as well as promoting healthy eating, advising on warm homes discount, energy tariffs and the Priority Services Register.
- Participate in energy roadshows and other events in rural communities across the area, along with online workshops, to increase knowledge and confidence in relevant energy efficiency and renewable energy products.
- Maintain comprehensive resources online on relevant energy efficiency and renewable energy products, including local case studies of implementation.
- Continue to promote the plight of households off the electricity grid and work with key strategic partners, including Northumberland County Council and Northumberland National Park, through the Northumberland Off-grid Taskforce. Deliver our 'Powering People' project to directly support these households and advocate for public sector intervention.
- Utilise our own infrared camera, assisting specific property owners to identify their key areas of heat loss, complementing our other project activity.
- Manage our 'OilCAN' membership scheme, helping people off-gas to obtain competitive prices for heating oil, LPG and coal and also providing a ready network for the promotion of alternative, non-fossil fuel heat sources and hybrid heat pump systems.
- Produce the 'CosyCAN' newsletter each winter highlighting tips for staying warm and reducing energy bills, an ever increasing issue.
- Work with the North East and Yorkshire Net Zero Hub and other partnership mechanisms to support the transition to net zero across as many rural communities as possible.

We will explore funding opportunities to enable more people to be trained in energy advice and installation, building on our internal training success and providing a model for training

which can be adopted elsewhere and help meet the workforce shortage in qualified energy specialists which currently exists.

Rural Housing Enabling

The need to develop more affordable homes across Northumberland is identified as a high priority across all organisations. House prices are too often way beyond the reach of people needing housing locally – for work, to deliver services, to provide care, or to be close to family.

All too often, Housing Associations and other providers of affordable homes find it too difficult and too expensive to be able to deliver small scale schemes of new affordable homes in smaller settlements. Coupled with a declining amount of existing social housing due to the impact of Right to Buy policies (and the subsequent failure to re-provide such housing in the same communities) and the declining amount of low-cost private sector rental accommodation, the availability of affordable homes is becoming an ever more critical need.

Following many years of pressure from rural organisations, government made funds available in 2023 to provide ‘Rural Housing Enablers’ across rural England. This funding was made available through the ACRE Network and CAN was one of the first two organisations to secure the funds and to employ a Rural Housing Enabler (RHE).

The RHE works between Housing Associations, the Council, developers, Parish Councils and communities to support the development of affordable homes in settlements of fewer than 3000 people. The value of the project in advancing a strong pipeline of schemes is clearly evident and it is critical that this service continues for many years to come.

Current funds run until March 2027 with a potential extension to March 2029. Our priority is to work through the ACRE network to secure funds to enable the scheme to continue. We will also explore other avenues for funding this service in future years.

Volunteering

In 2023, we joined a partnership with other Local Infrastructure Organisations across the North of Tyne area in delivering a new volunteer development project. This has enabled us to build on our existing volunteer work through our existing networks, support local organisations to enhance their use of volunteers and help deliver training both to organisations taking on volunteers and the volunteers themselves. The project has been hugely successful but, unfortunately, funds to continue the project beyond March 2026 are not confirmed. We have seen the huge value of the project and will seek to incorporate the further development within our emerging proposals for a ‘Rural Inclusion Network.’

Health and wellbeing initiatives

CAN has developed a number of projects in recent years targeting health and wellbeing issues. Often generated through our Warm Hubs and Rural Employment Hubs, initiatives have included a very successful slow cooking revolution, educating Warm Hub and Employment Hub participants in healthy, energy-efficient eating. This project has distributed over 500 slow



cookers to local residents. We will seek to build on the success of these initiatives, exploring opportunities through the North East health infrastructure and wider funding opportunities to extend, enhance and develop our services including through social prescribing, village agents and other mechanisms.

Community Fund management

We will continue to facilitate and support the community benefits fund attached to the Wingates windfarm and will offer similar services to other funders seeking to distribute funds locally, for example through our successful partnership in recent years with the Ballinger Trust. We will seek to build on the findings of our work in partnership with NICRE and RDC in relation to the Royal Countryside Fund, the findings of which are due to be published in Spring 2026.

Resourcing the Plan

1. Governance

The activities of CAN are overseen by a board of voluntary trustees who are responsible for the strategic management of CAN's affairs including the maintenance of a risk register, budget monitoring and policy development. The Board currently has one committee – the Finance & General Purposes Committee. Our memorandum and articles state that the board will consist of not fewer than 3 and not more than 20 trustees. As at February 2026, the Board consists of 9 people.

A trustee skills audit was carried out in 2024 as part of CAN's ongoing work to ensure the board encompasses all the necessary skills and experience required. The Board will seek to maintain a strong mix of required skills, experience and geographical representation across trustees in line with our agreed Board Composition and Succession policy.

2. Staffing

The current (February 2026) staffing structure consists of 22 members of staff, which represents 14.8 FTE posts. The team is structured as follows:

Chief Executive (0.8 FTE)

Responsible for: performance management; input to Board; staff management; strategic partner relationships; leading on 'rural voice' work; identifying and securing income; project development, management & leadership.

Communications Manager (0.4FTE)

Leading all communications matters including websites, social media, bulletins and campaigns.

Finance and Administration Officers (Two posts: 1.4 FTE):

Responsible for: all financial matters, administration and office management for CAN and NALC.

Community Development Officers (four posts: 3.6 FTE)

- 1.0 FTE leading on employability
- 0.8 FTE leading on energy & fuel poverty
- 0.8 FTE leading on village halls & community buildings
- 1.0 FTE leading on Warm Hubs, digital inclusion & transport

Work Coaches (four posts: 1.1 FTE)

Responsible for: delivery of the Employment Hub service, supporting individual clients and all reporting.

Energy team (eight posts: 5.6 FTE))

- 2.6 FTE Climate Action Officers
- 1.0 FTE Energy Advice & Engagement Officer
- 0.4 FTE Community Buildings Energy Adviser
- 1.6 FTE Off-Grid Energy Advisers

Northumberland Community Energy Ltd Project Officer (0.6 FTE)

Responsible for delivering NCEL projects.

Rural Housing Enabler (0.6 FTE)

Responsible for liaising with all partners, developing pipeline of projects, Rural Housing Advisory Group.

NALC Chief Officer (0.5 FTE)

Leading on delivery of the Memorandum of Understanding and all associated services with NALC.

We aim to create a stable, secure and collaborative working environment that enables staff to play a significant role in the organisation's development. We operate an annual appraisal system within the framework of this Plan and staff are supported to undertake training where this supports CAN's objectives and work programme. In 2016, CAN became accredited as a 'Living Wage Employer.' We have also achieved the Good Work Pledge awarded by NECA.

During the covid-19 crisis, all staff successfully worked from home and a 'Blended Working' policy was subsequently introduced, enabling the benefits of home-based work to become the norm, with staff utilising the office as and when required. We provide all necessary equipment to operate effectively from home and award a Home Work Allowance.

3. Budget Overview

The budgeted expenditure for CAN in 2026/27 is £880,000. This may fluctuate during the year and is consistent with recent years.

Our target is to maintain a break-even position on the budget and invest any annual surpluses in delivery whilst maintaining reserves at the required level.

4. Financial Strategy

Core elements of our income come from Defra and NALC with the remainder being raised from a combination of contracts, consultancy, project funded activity and donations.

Over the last 9 years we have grown our income from these sources. As part of our financial strategy we aim to maintain a portfolio of grants and contracts from a range of sources in order to minimise exposure to any specific funder. We also seek to develop regular sources of revenue through our various partnership activities.

The headlines of our financial strategy include:

- Ensuring we deliver appropriately on all secured funding sources.
- Securing resources to cover all items of expenditure incurred by our projects (full-cost recovery).
- Maintaining a level of unrestricted reserves which is sufficient to cover our liability for unforeseen costs such as redundancy payments, sickness/maternity/paternity salary cover, relocation costs, and IT equipment. In addition, we aim to have sufficient reserves to meet up to 4 months running costs.
- Seeking donations from appreciative past beneficiaries and charitable funders.
- Giving a high priority to the timely submission of financial claims and reports in a format acceptable to funders.

- Constantly pursuing ways of minimising our costs: for example, by negotiating with suppliers, by adjusting our staffing levels and changing working practices to meet changes in our finances.
- Negotiating with key funders near the end of their financial year or programme duration, to maximise the use of their time-limited resources.
- Considering carefully 'loss-leader' work, where this will build a stronger relationship with key funders.
- Monitoring, planning and adjusting on a continual basis to allow flexibility and a response to changing circumstances.

5. Physical Resources

CAN is based within the UNIUN Enterprise Building in Pegswood. The office space is currently adequate to accommodate the team and there are no plans to move premises.

We rent community premises in each location where our Employment Hubs operate. Training and other services will be delivered throughout Northumberland by utilisation of appropriate accommodation. CAN's websites will be used to enable access to information and services and communication forums.

6. Marketing and Communications

During 2015, marketing was identified as a key weakness of CAN. This was addressed in October 2016 with the appointment of a marketing consultant, initially on an 11-month contract. This proved its value over the years in improving the quality, reach and impact of our communications.

In 2025 we brought this activity fully in-house through recruitment of a permanent, part-time, Communications Manager reflecting our drive to ensure effective communication of our impact and services to funders, policymakers and communities. A comprehensive review of our internal and external communications is underway led by the Communications Manager and a joint trustee/staff working group. This will be implemented from 2026 onwards. This will include our websites, social media, bulletins, campaigns, branding and internal communications.

Implementation

The Operating Plan is actioned through the staffing structure with bi-monthly operational reports from the Chief Executive to the Board. Finances are interrogated at our Finance & General Purposes Committee ahead of each Board meeting.

Staff online drop-ins are held each week with staff face-to-face meetings once every quarter. Trustees and staff also meet each year at an annual away day to review progress, challenges and opportunities.

As our budgets fluctuate from year-to-year, depending on funding success, we will manage our budget and internal capacity accordingly to ensure a break-even position is retained with any surpluses re-invested in delivery.

Appendix: SWOT analysis

The following provides a summary of the key strengths and opportunities on which we will seek to capitalise over the next three years, as well as the weaknesses and threats we will address in order to achieve our strategic objectives. This SWOT analysis will be reviewed early during the Business Plan period to ensure its relevance and accuracy.

<p>Strengths (Internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accumulated knowledge and wisdom • Rural credentials • Connections and relationships with rural groups • Understand local geography, who's who and who is doing what • Recognised by Defra as a key player • Part of a bigger and stronger network via ACRE • Specialist expertise re community buildings, energy, housing, employability & other areas • Trusted by our beneficiaries • Good reputation with many partner organisations and valued by clients • Reputation for good people skills and ability to connect with dispersed groups • Facilitation and acting as an intermediary • Strong staff loyalty to CAN and team • CAN staff work flexibly and collaboratively and have good organisational knowledge • Staff and board able and willing to adapt, work flexibly and diversify into new service areas • Strong board with good connections to staff • Lean and agile organisation • Growing links to NECA 	<p>Weaknesses (Internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial insecurity can create short-term focus, restricting ambition and forward planning • Core staff resources stretched with pressure to access funding and deliver against targets and deadlines limiting diversity of projects • Danger of diverting resources away from delivery to seeking future funding • Staff not always having the appropriate skills to deliver in a rapidly changing environment • Internal communications difficult due to dispersed staff • Need to improve communication of impact
<p>Opportunities (External)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build on our core, valued and proven expertise • Potential for increased strategic collaboration with key partners, building on recent successes • Expand consultancy work and training provision • Build CAN's reputation through effective communication and marketing • Charging for services (e.g. services to NCEL and Communities CAN) • Direct collaboration with other ACRE Network members • Using untapped skills among staff and volunteers • Income generation via energy and other services • Developing CAN's relationship with NICRE and the Rural Design Centre 	<p>Threats (External)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declining policy/funding focus on rural communities • Need to manage staff/contract levels as success leads to increasing workload • Competitive nature of the VCS sector • Loss of revenue from current funders, inc central Govt • Insufficient end-users / funders able or willing to pay to cover full costs of services • Responding to ability to pay / funding opportunities instead of identified needs • Continual change in operating environment and not responding to this • Change in local and central government policy • Loss of staff expertise through long term illness, retirement or resignation