



RSN working with **inac** in support of Rural Market Towns

Minutes of the RMTG Clerks Advisory Panel

Online via Zoom

10:30–12:00, Friday, 17th March 2023

Present:

Vivienne Little, Keswick TC. Cumbria.
Tim Kirton, Alnwick TC. Northumberland
Vivienne Tunnadine, Penrith TC. Cumbria
Elizabeth Squires, Kirkham TC. Lancashire
Jane Scarrott, Watton TC. Suffolk
Caroline Leet, Edenbridge TC. Surrey.
Andrea Durn, Wotton under Edge TC. Gloucestershire.
Belina Boyer, Gainsborough TC. Lincolnshire
Marilyn Strand, Soham TC. Cambridgeshire
Kerren Rodgers, North Sunderland and Sea Houses PC. Northumberland

Officers

Graham Biggs MBE RMTG - RSN
David Inman RMTG – RSN

Apologies:

Angela Howells, Westerham Town Council
Davina Neale, Clare Town Council
Lynda Scriven, Wellesbourne & Walton Parish Council
David Martin, Corsham Town Council
Jack Sargent, Spilsby Town Council
Tina Jeffery, Uttoxeter Town Council
Milly Southworth, Torpoint Town Council
Trudi Barrett, Much Wenlock Town Council
Helen Johnson, Heathfield and Waldron Parish Council
Greg Burt, Billingshurst Parish Council
Chris Pilkington, Sleaford Town Council

1. **Welcome from Graham Biggs MBE, Chief Executive and David Inman, Corporate Director**

Graham and David welcomed the Clerks and thanked them for attending. The meeting was intended to give member clerks who were interested an annual forum where the intentions and thoughts behind the operation of the group, and also current issues could be discussed with Town Clerks. This session would take place annually at this time of

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year. Matters particularly identified in this session would if felt necessary go to the Spring Councillor meeting taking place later in the month (Monday 27th March 4-30pm to 6pm.)

2. Cost of Living Survey

RSN were currently themselves undertaking this survey at what was felt to be a tricky time. It was being looked on as a 'household questionnaire' across rural and rural town homes. Earlier research by the RSN had shown that living costs were on average higher in rural areas and in rural towns than in other areas, while 'in-rural area' wages tended to be lower in both. Therefore, it was anticipated that people in rural areas as a whole might be encountering possibly even greater problems than was the case across England when considered as through national statistics. The hoped for responses would have been at least a thousand, making it was felt statistically significant.

The survey was still running (till the 31st of March) but certainly in terms of returns these had been considerably higher than would have been anticipated at this stage. (Currently 6,517 'homes' had completed the survey) The clerks and councillors were thanked for their considerable help here. Some councils had even arranged for paper distribution where it was felt simply e-transmission could be more difficult for people. It was hoped that an analysis would be available in some detail, if not fully completed, by the 17th of April and obviously members would be kept fully updated with the results.

3. Annual Local Government Finance Settlement (Graham)

Last month the announcement of the Local Government Settlement Finance Settlement had been made by Government. This was an important annual settlement that took place at this time of the year, and it dictated the grant settlement to all English Principal Councils for the financial year 2023/2024. The settlement saw the outcomes from the draft Settlement that had been announced before Christmas and to which local authorities and organisations like RSN had made representations. Whilst this might be primarily considered in terms of principal councils (Unitaries, County, and District Councils) that sole viewpoint was in fact incorrect, the consequences of this settlement in reality set the consequences for local people and for local councils as well. It sets the scene for the level of services that could be provided locally. Rural areas and rural towns had been a disadvantaged because in England (and only in England) urban considerations had historically received greater government focus than rural ones. Over time a significant gap had developed between the government grant that fed back to urban residents in service terms and that given to rural areas. Urban residents per head now received significantly more. This gap had widened for 23/24 compared to 2022/23. This, even though RSN had been successful in getting an increase of £10M in the Rural Services Delivery Grant, which they had been successful in persuading Government to introduce some years ago. To tackle this now dangerous situation in relation to rural services it was felt essential that all councils both principal and local showed their concern about this to government. Members were reminded that there was a RSN Seminar on the situation relating to Finance on Wednesday 29th March.

It was vital that Towns appreciated the current situation:-

- a. People living in rural areas and rural towns received back in service grant £134 less per head than they would do if they lived in an urban area.
- b. This meant council tax had to be higher £110 per head for people living in a rural area. This was paid out of a lower, earned in area, wage level.

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- c. Considerably more services, particularly discretionary services were being hit in rural areas than urban areas even though rural areas had a considerably lower service base initial service base and it costs more to provide services in rural areas.

It was essential principal and local councils came together to show concerns about this continual 'penalisation' of people living in rural areas and rural towns under the current distribution systems.

The RSN would be deciding its 'campaign messaging' over the next few months.

4. Rural Services "Manifesto"

With the certainty that there would be a general election within the next two years RSN had started the process of shaping a call on the main political parties setting out the Network's suggestions relating to the ambit of matters which affected rural areas. This would have to be a high-level document which would be sent to all the main political parties in the hope that awareness of the considered rural position might assist parties to consider for themselves and reflect in their Manifestos the needs of rural areas. The document would also be used in relation to pressing the new government during the lifetime of the next parliament and monitoring progress made. RMTG members singularly and collectively, would be asked for their thoughts and input into this process.

5. Rural England CIC Survey (Graham)

One of the reasons for setting up Local Councils Groups, including the RMTG, was to give local councillors the opportunity to input into research in respect of issues affecting rural areas and towns. As University research was often commercially commissioned, and often didn't therefore cover general rural research, RSN had helped to establish a community interest company, Rural England CIC which sought to ensure that some flow of rural area/town research study occurred. The Company was an independent entity and not a part of RSN.

This summer there would be research by Rural England, based on Rural/ Market Town issues, involving the Rural England researcher, who was based at the University of Leicester. Town Councils would be asked to be involved in such research by responding to surveys from time to time, and it was important that time was found by Councils for these. Research was key if problem areas were to be accurately identified. There had been continual comment that people in rural areas weren't being heard, and it was important the rurally based Town Councils worked with RMTG and Rural England CIC to seek to ensure that valid evidence based positions were established so that views upon them could be made.

6. Rural Homelessness Final Report (Graham)

Research commissioned by a number of rural organisations, including the RSN, had been published that morning. [Link to Press Release and Report.](#)

This would be included on the agenda for the RMTG meeting on 27th March.

7. RMTG Service to Members - Programme Extensions 2023/24

The Group had now been fully running for some 3 years and at the end of each year RSN gave consideration as to what might be additionally possible in the following years.

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For 2023/24 the following addition measures would be introduced:-

(1) **Town Catchments (also see 8 below):-** We think Rural Towns lose opportunities for grant consideration because of the lower population totals. They are however the service centre for their wider rural catchment. It is important that the places in this catchment are identified, totalled in population terms and recorded with the town population. People in these catchments benefit from improvements in town centres if grants are given and it is important these matters are looked at more holistically.

(2) **Links To Member Websites:-** On the RMTG area of the RSN website we show those towns and parishes who are RMTG members. We do this in county 'pages' showing the names of the Communities in each county and their official crests. We will now add to that by placing a link to the Town or Parish's website by simply clicking on this crest.

(3) **RMTG Emblem for incorporation on Member's own websites:-** Many Councils like to set on their own websites what organisations they support. We will provide you with a suitable template so that you can in future demonstrate your inter connection with our work. It is important that as many people know about and recognise the importance of this work as is possible.

(4) **Call to Government for more statistical information to be brought down to town/parish level:-** Little information is collected and/or published by government statisticians down to town or parish level. At a time when in some areas the District Council level is being removed in favour of larger unitary councils this seems to be wrong. Local Councillors, prospective councillors and local people deserve statistics at their level of interest to have an important tool to be able to do their job. We will continually push this matter until improvements are made.

8. **Discussion re the current RMTG survey**

There was a current survey taking place by the RMTG which was requesting important information from members relating to their perceived parish catchments around member towns, town market arrangement and history, information on shopping centre, any tourist information and information on particularly special events taking place annually in towns. This was an important survey as this was essential building block information that would allow the RMTG to go forward. (It was separate from 5 above which would take place later in 2023.) It was really important that EVERY TOWN OR PARISH who are members of RMTG complete this Survey Monkey questionnaire. Members were asked to give this special priority if they had not already completed it.

[Complete the Market Town and Town Activities Survey by clicking here](#)

9. **Any Other Business**

Andrea Durn, The Wotton under Edge Town Clerk, enquired about the mechanisms for groups with some interest in rural towns such as the RMTG, NALC, SLCC, the LGA which she felt had a rural arm to work together as much as was possible. Officers explained that RSN itself was a Special Interest of the Local Government Association, and that it sought to represent the rural interest as the sole player at the LGA that focused entirely on rural services. The LGA's Rural Commission together with the previous Government body, Commission for Rural Communities unfortunately no longer operated. The LGA had to represent all interests across England and now only a Cities Group and a People and Places Board continued. The RSN and the RMTG were working directly with NALC in the

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RMTG initiative but as NALC had members in both urban and rural areas it would be the RSN who would front the RMTG initiative. Rural representative of organisations with a rural voice from across England came together from time to time in an arrangement known as the 'Rural Coalition' which sort to find common positions across the various rural sectors.

It was agreed that as much liaison on rural issues as possible was desirable and the RSN/RMTG would continue in its endeavours to look to achieve that with initiatives targeted in that direction from time to time.

RMTG Meeting Schedule 2023

Friday, 17 February 2023	14.00-15.00	RMTG Officer Steering Group meeting
Friday, 17 March 2023	10.30-12.00	RMTG Clerks Advisory Panel meeting
Monday, 27 March 2023	16.30-18.00	RMTG meeting
Tuesday, 1 August 2023	16.00-17.00	RMTG - Older People Sounding Board meeting
Thursday, 3 August 2023	16.00-17.00	RMTG - Young People Sounding Board meeting
Thursday, 28 Sept 2023	14.00-15.00	RMTG Officer Steering Group meeting
Tuesday, 10 Oct 2023	16.30-18.00	RMTG meeting

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