

AI Meeting summary for RMTG: Younger People Sounding Board Meeting (10/07/2025)

Quick recap

The Rural Services Network meeting focused on addressing challenges facing young people in rural areas, with discussions led by Kerry Booth the Chief Executive of the RSN, who highlighted key issues including limited educational opportunities, transportation problems, and mental health access. The meeting featured presentations from Thame Youth Projects, which detailed their work providing youth services despite funding constraints and space limitations, while also addressing drug-related concerns in their community. The session concluded with discussions about funding opportunities and challenges, with Kerry encouraging participants to share their local initiatives and promising to distribute presentation materials and funding information to attendees.

Summary

Rural Youth Initiatives Discussion

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, welcomes participants to a meeting focused on younger people in rural areas. She explains that the session will include a short presentation on their work, followed by a talk from Linda Newton and Councillor Cowell from Thame Youth Projects about their initiatives for young people. Kerry emphasises that the meeting is an opportunity to listen to participants' experiences and ensure their campaigning work aligns with rural community needs.

Rural Services Network Overview

Kerry presents an overview of the Rural Services Network, a membership organisation representing rural communities and service providers. She highlights challenges faced by young people in rural areas, including limited educational and employment opportunities, poor public transport, and mental health service accessibility issues. Kerry discusses findings from various reports and committees, emphasising the need for improved infrastructure, affordable housing, and better connectivity in rural areas. She introduces the organisation's "Delivering for All" campaign, which outlines eight policy areas where government action is needed to enhance rural communities and unlock rural prosperity.

Rural Funding and Service Disparities

Kerry discusses the challenges faced by rural areas and the Rural Services Network's policy recommendations. She highlights three main issues: unfair funding for rural services, inadequate metrics for understanding rural challenges, and the need for a specific rural plan from the government. Kerry explains that urban councils receive 40% more in Government Funded Spending Power per head compared to rural councils, ultimately leading to higher council taxes in rural areas. This disparity results in reduced discretionary services in rural communities. Kerry also addresses challenges in affordable housing, the rural economy, and public transport. She

emphasises the potential for rural economic growth if infrastructure and connectivity issues are addressed, estimating a potential £19 billion contribution to the Treasury.

Rural Challenges and Youth Impact

Kerry discusses several challenges facing rural communities and their impact on young people. She highlights issues with transportation, emphasising how limited bus schedules can prevent students from accessing additional educational opportunities. Kerry also addresses problems with healthcare access, particularly mental health support for young people, and the difficulties in recruiting and retaining workforce in rural areas. She emphasises the need for better connectivity, noting that only 54% of rural premises have gigabit capability, which could affect students' ability to complete online homework and access training and skills development. Kerry advocates for a more tailored approach to rural housing development, suggesting a mix of housing types to meet diverse community needs. She calls for government policies that consider the unique challenges of rural areas in areas such as energy, broadband access, and planning.

Thame Youth Project

Linda Newton and Councillor Paul Cowell discuss the Thame Youth Projects, a charity established in 2012 to provide youth services after Oxfordshire County Council cut funding. The organisation aims to offer inclusive, accessible support to all young people in Thame, a town of about 13,000 residents with approximately 2,200 secondary school students. They highlight the increasing demand for their services, addressing issues such as mental health crises, social exclusion, special educational needs, exploitation, and LGBTQ support. The charity employs one youth worker and relies on volunteers to provide both mass youth work and bespoke support for specific needs.

Charities Struggle with rising demand

The charity is facing increasing pressure due to rising registrations, particularly for anxiety and for young people with special educational needs, which is straining their volunteer capacity and making safeguarding more complex. They are also struggling with limited facilities, having to turn people away due to space constraints, and lacking a dedicated youth venue. The organisation operates on a budget of £42,000 per year, with £15,000 coming from the Council, and faces challenges in securing additional funding due to their location in a "leafy green" area. They have identified a need to reduce administrative work for their youth worker to increase direct support for young people.

Youth Project Challenges and Growth

The youth project faces challenges including administrative burden, lack of permanent venues, and the need to review free services provided to schools. Despite these constraints, the project is making a positive impact, with parents noting increased confidence and social opportunities for their children. The organisation is working with the town council to build a community use centre, which will bring new challenges but also opportunities for growth. Rural disadvantage and lack of prioritisation from the county council are identified as barriers to their work. The project aims to expand its face-to-face delivery and continue offering diverse holiday activities to reach more young people.

Youth Drug Issues in Small Towns

The discussion focuses on youth engagement and drug-related issues in small towns. Participants share experiences from Thame, where despite its picturesque appearance, there are problems with drugs and county lines activity. They emphasise the importance of providing safe spaces for young people and maintaining strong relationships with schools and PCSOs to address these issues. However, concerns are raised about potential reductions in PCSO hours due to funding limitations, which may impact their ability to provide coverage outside normal working hours.

Rural Youth Funding Challenges

Kerry shares information about a monthly funding digest that the RSN provides which lists grants and opportunities for rural areas, and should be sent to council members or clerks. A delegate discusses their approach to expanding a youth centre into a community use centre, which opens up more funding avenues while still maintaining a dedicated space for young people. Councillor Jensen highlights the challenges of funding youth services in a town on the edge of multiple counties, where children often attend schools in different authorities. The group discusses the difficulties in securing funding for ongoing costs, particularly for youth workers, as many grants focus on specific activities or projects rather than operational expenses. Kerry emphasises the broader funding challenges faced by rural local authorities, including the high costs of social care and transport, which can squeeze budgets for other services.

Youth funding and opportunities for learning

Kerry concludes the meeting by thanking participants for their input and sharing her email for those who want to receive the funding digest or provide feedback on their work with young people. kerry.booth@sparse.gov.uk. She encourages attendees to share case studies of their local initiatives, which can be published on the RSN website to facilitate learning across different regions. Kerry promises to send a copy of her presentation and relevant links to attendees, and invites them to speak at future events to share their experiences.