



**RMTG Meeting
Online via Zoom
16:30pm-18pm, Monday, 9th November 2020
Meeting Notes**

Attendance

Cllr Chris Allen	Burnham-On-Sea & Highbridge Town Council
Brian Angell	Clun Town Council with Chapel Lawn
Christian Barnes	Kirkby Stephen Town Council
Cllr Jenny Bartlett	Leominster Town Council
Graham Biggs MBE	Rural Services Network
Cllr Stephen Bunney	Market Rasen Town Council
Cllr Colin Carmichael	East Horsley Parish Council
Cllr Jonathan Davies	Penrith Town Council
Cllr Jo Durden-Moore	Wendover Parish Council
Cllr Richard Elvin	Hetton Town Council
Cllr Kim Fletcher	Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council
Cllr Margaret Gateley	Buckingham Town Council
Sarah Greatorex	Halstead Town Council
Cllr Dan Hallet	Bicester Town Council
Clare Harris	Marlborough Town Council
Cllr Anthony Hirons	Lutterworth Town Council
Julie Holden	East Grinstead Town Council
Angela Howells	Westerham Town Council
Cllr Robert Hull	Hexham Town Council
Cllr Andy Hutton	Tavistock Town Council
David Inman	Rural Services Network
Katie Jeffreys	Earby Town Council
Cllr Conrad Lynch	Kirkby Stephen Town Council
Keli Nolan-Lyons	Tenterden Town Council
Cllr Lisa O'Donoghue	Buckingham Town Council
Penny O'Hagan	Wem Town Council
Cllr Liz Parker	Oxted Parish Council
Cllr Clive Parkinson	Thornbury Town Council
Cllr Garry Pethurst	Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council
Cllr Chris Plowright	Rothwell Town Council
Cllr Lynda Robertson	Midsomer Norton Town Council
Cllr Richard Robertson	Midsomer Norton Town Council
Frances Simpson	New Alresford Town Council

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Rural Services Network

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Angela	Standing	Arundel Town Council
Cllr John	Stockwood	Bingham Town Council
Cllr Mike	Thompson	St Austell Town Council
Sally	Thurston	Faringdon Town Council
Cllr Alison	Treney	Uttoxeter Town Council
Cllr Steve	Trottet	Lechlade on Thames Town Council
Cllr Martin	Tucker	Wotton-under-Edge Town Council
Andrea	Vincent	Olney Town Council
Cllr Diane	Ward	Uckfield Town Council
Mark	Wells	Bovey Tracey Town Council
Cllr Philip	Wicks	Richmond Town Council
Cllr Linda	Wild	Whitby Town Council
Cllr Sarah	Williams	Bridport Town Council
Cllr Judith	Wright	Biddenden Parish Council

Apologies

Will	Austin	Bridport Town Council
Tara	Ball	Penistone Town Council
Cllr Keeley	Allin	Great Torrington Town Council
Cllr Jennifer	Ballantine	Wendover Parish Council
Debra	Barlow	Warsop Parish Council
Carolyn	Baynes	Arundel Town Council
Cllr Vaughan	Blake	Alcester Town Council
Karen	Chapman	Great Torrington Town Council
Cllr Doreen	Collins	Diss Town Council
Cllr Steve	Critten	Caistor Town Council
Claire	Dornan	Downham Market Town Council
Chris	Drake	Launceston Town Council
Sarah	Fox	Daventry Town Council
David	Gordon	Launceston Town Council
Roger	Gwatkin	East Grinstead Town Council
Cllr Robert	Heseltine	Skipton Town Council
Ginette	James	Lechlade on Thames Town Council
Jonathan	Pallant	St Ives Town Council
Angela	Price	Ledbury Town Council
Sarah	Richards	Diss Town Council
Cllr Chris	Ryley	Burscough Town Council
Vanessa	Saunders	Holsworthy Town Council
Keith	Shelley	Wendover Parish Council
Cllr Andy	Stuart	Rye Town Council
Sue	Templeman	Ackworth Parish Council
Sharon	Thomas	Corsham Town Council
Cllr Mark	Thorpe	Verwood Town Council
Lynda	Walker	Keswick Town Council
David	Wright	Market Harborough Town

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1. Welcome and introduction to Rural Services Network from Graham Biggs MBE, Chief Executive and David Inman, Director

David Inman and **Graham Biggs MBE** introduced themselves and the Rural Services Network (RSN) and formally welcomed RMTG representatives.

David outlined that we as an organisation focus on rural economy and services and seek to help rural areas across England to facilitate discussions, find consensus, share best practice and network. RSN is a representational group that seeks to advocate on behalf of rural areas be it in discussions with organisations and businesses that serve rural areas, lobbying the Government through our All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) and advocating for fair funding for rural areas through the Rural Fair Share Group. We also produce the weekly Rural Bulletin and a monthly RSN Rural Funding Digest publication seeking to inform our members on our work, events and on all relevant rural matters. Both publications go out to our 23,000 subscribers across England.

Graham emphasised that we are non-politically and entirely non-party organisation. He also mentioned that while RSN works with Principal local authorities, our partner organisation Rural Services Partnership (RSP) deals with non-local authority service providers and other organisations with a rural interest. The RMTG sits within the RSP part of the RSN.

2. Discussion on the intended brief of the RMTG

As a country England is more urban than the other home countries and most initiatives and policies have urban roots. The RSN's prime concern are rural services and we believe that rural matters must be thoroughly considered when building a strong national economy. We are forming this group because we believe that Rural Market Towns are a crucial part of the rural economy and of the way rural areas operate because they are its service hubs, hence why we seek to establish a national Rural Market Town network.

In addition to the above, we would also like to encourage members to share their best practice. We are currently running and have already requested input from all members by sending a link to the RMTG Good Practice Survey. We will seek to consult all members on these matters on a periodic basis and share this information within the group.

[Please click here to access the RMTG Good Practice Survey](#)

David outlined that about 20 years ago a similar market town group, which involved larger towns was created and was lottery funded. Due to the nature of their source of funding, and lack thereof the group eventually dissolved. We believe that forming a Rural/Market Town Group has a strong benefit to members as well as England's national economy. That is why we seek to form this group and to share best practice, network and facilitate group discussions while seeking joint consensus on matters that matter most to

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RMTG as a group. We wish to do this with the overarching purpose of amplifying the RMTG voice on the national stage.

Graham mentioned that since founding RSN 20 years ago and campaigning on behalf of rural areas over those years our experience has shown us two things:

1. While we always consider different regionally based nuances, we often find that issues facing our members are likely the same issues facing communities in other rural areas across England.
2. Based on these common issues facing rural areas, we seek to find common ground upon which we can stand when representing views and concerns to the Government and policy makers, amplifying the RSN joint voice on a national level.

We seek to harness and collect these common views as they are more popular and powerful with MPs, Government, opinion, and policy formers, than the individual voice of individual areas. And particularly now, the role of market towns, rather than general rural areas, in respect of employment and service centre we think it is sufficiently different, than the generality of rural to deserve a distinct voice within the RSN. We are not trying to compete with National Association of Local Councils (NALC) or with ACRE representing rural communities. It is worth mentioning that we all occasionally do come together and are all part of The Rural Coalition with other organisations. We also work with NALC, ACRE, and Plunkett but we all have our own areas of expertise when it comes to rural matters. The RSN area of expertise and wider agenda focuses on services, employment and rural economy and related issues. Through these matters we seek to represent and support the varied needs of people, businesses and communities who rely on and live in and around rural market towns. We are seeking to capture the collective voice of the group and the people who heavily rely on rural market towns, to successfully advocate and make representations to Government on RMTG issues. Therefore, going forward we would like to emphasise that all future RMTG meetings and their respective agendas will be dictated by RMTG members and their needs.

David also brought up that part of the work we do with local authorities is arguing the rural financial case. It is hard work because Government is trying to juggle with the financial situation of the nation as a whole and therefore it is important that the rural voice is presented and considered. We do not think that the playing field is level when it comes to urban vs rural settings, as well as between how Government treats different areas of the country. That difficulty can manifest itself in issues with who takes up responsibilities for certain services to the public, especially when there is not sufficient funding. It is important to highlight this difficulty and highlight it in the context of a comparison between funding allocated per urban resident vs per rural resident. We raise these issues on behalf of our members across England to the Government.

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Graham also added that rural areas get significantly less Government allocated grant per head of population than their urban counterparts. Since that is still a real problem, we will continue arguing with Government until it is corrected. Graham highlighted that members have the evidence to enable us to make a national case. We can always work with national statistics, but we also wish to work to ensure that we can present that picture with hard evidence with the impact on businesses, communities, and people on the ground. Graham highlighted that our members, including RMTG, have the evidence to enable us to make a national case.

Comments

Brian Angell, Clun Town Council with Chapel Lawn:

On the issue of transport there is some disconnect with planning so although Highways are consultates, they only look at immediate access not the wider impact of traffic and public transport needs. Would be interested in any survey to know if that is something others find and how best we can get better integration.

Cllr Richard Robertson, Midsomer Norton Town Council:

Our principal council, Bath and North East Somerset District Council. When the area was divided to go under different local authority responsibility, we got allocated a few green spaces, which so far, we have successfully been able to manage. 82% of Bath and North East Somerset Councils community council tax is spent on social and adult care, which does not leave them much to spend on other things that should be attended to. We are finding that we are having to budget for some youth activities because our principal council simply does not have enough funds to do this. Regarding a Transport survey, this past September I took part in a national transport survey called "The Future of Transport" (organised by the Government's transport department) and matters such as rural transport came up as there was wide response from areas all over the UK. The results of that survey might be worth looking at.

Graham Biggs in response to Brian Angell's and Cllr Richard Robertson's queries:

In response to the issue raised by **Brian Angell**, in my experience issues regarding transport are different everywhere and there is no uniform pattern, but transport is a major issue in all rural areas. With regard to service 'devolution' generally, sometimes the principal council simply states that they will stop providing that service and asks town or parish councils if they wish to take it up. Sometimes principal councils offer some temporary financial support to start this service or sometimes establishes a long running financial partnership in running shared services. Graham highlighted that as a national organisation RSN seeks to gather evidence, information and issues and take them into the national plain and cannot get involved in disputes or debates between members, in this case RMTG members and Principal Local Authority members. Be it transport or other discretionary services, all related issues

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stem from the point that has just been raised by **Cllr Richard Robertson**. It is the case broadly (especially in unitary councils and county councils) that statutory duty for adult and children social care, quite often inhibits the provision of other services. And this issue is part of the financial rural case that we are trying to highlight. Especially since we know that the Government is providing less funding per head in rural areas, while the actual costs of adult and children social care is higher (compared to urban) for a lot of different reasons, exacerbating funding issues for other discretionary services. We need the evidence to support the service consequences of those financial decisions.

David Inman in response to all rural transport related queries:

David concluded that considering queries and comments on rural transport and related matters, the member RMTG group has showed support for being surveyed on rural transport.

From Cllr Tony Hiron, Lutterworth Town Council:

As well as being a councillor in a Market Town in Leicestershire, I am also NALC Rep for Leicestershire & Rutland. One of NALC's most successful initiatives is a Parliamentary lobbying day - do you intend to do anything similar?

Graham Biggs response:

We are not the same as NALC, but we are the Secretariat for the All-party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on rural services. We also have a group in the House of Lords. Through these groups we have 3 to 5 significant lobbying opportunities throughout the year. The last NALC Parliamentary Day was held on the same day as our sister organisations (Rural England Community Interest Company) Rural Vulnerability Day event, which allowed a lot of synergy between both organisations, tying rural issues together and engaging attendees at both events.

From Kim Fletcher, Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council:

A major issue is the inability for local people to afford to buy homes. Developers build for incomers (from London) and then there is more pressure on 'affordable rented homes', so nonlocals with lots of 'points' get foisted into a rural location, where they do not want to be. As a result, our 'artisans' and children are priced out of the market. Parliament does not understand this issue as we are losing our future population to wealthy incomers and social housing.

Graham Biggs in response to Kim Fletcher's comment:

We are in complete agreement with affordable rural housing being a major issue in all rural areas across England and we seek to influence Government and policy makers to address this issue.

If you missed the first RMTG Newsletter (published in Autumn 2020), please follow the link below to access it.

[RMTG Newsletter – Autumn 2020](#)

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3. Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision campaign

Brief on the RSN campaign and its relation to RMTG.

Graham provided a brief overview of our previous and current campaigns. In March 2018, we launched a campaign “It’s Time for a Rural Strategy”. Since it has been over 20 years since the Government looked at developing a rural strategy and since the last Rural White Paper was published, we decided to call on Government to develop a rural strategy. Our campaign involved giving evidence on 3 separate occasions to a House of Lords (HoL) Select Committee on rural economy. This committee looked at the same issues we already highlighted in our rural strategy document, and they came to the exact same conclusion that it was “time for a rural strategy”. According to the parliamentary process, the Government is required to respond to HoL Select Committee’s report. Graham mentioned that the Government responded to this report by dismissing the need for a rural strategy but agreed that they need to refresh its vision for rural areas and acknowledged that they need work across departments to improve the situation in rural areas across England. Since then, eighteen months have passed, and we are yet to see the Government’s refreshed vision. We acknowledge that both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic has stood in the way of these issues, but our latest campaign “Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision” seeks to refresh our previous call and sets out practical ask from Government to solve rural issues. This campaign seeks to demonstrate how rural areas can assist the Government to achieve the national policy objectives they have already set out for themselves but this time with full consideration of rural areas. This campaign has 16 chapters and covers a broad range of rural issues.

You can access individual chapters and full document by following the link below:

[Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision campaign](#)

What this campaign and document demonstrate very well is that Government needs to support and act across all those areas currently facing rural areas across England. And most importantly, that responding to challenges facing rural areas with half-hearted measures and urban based policies will not help the Government to reach their national goals, especially when it comes to the national economy and national wellbeing of the whole nation.

In preparing the document we consulted extensively with our members and to keep this document live we will continue to consult our members in the future, seeking to gather evidence to support our findings. Therefore, if having read through our Revitalising Rural document, RMTG members find that we are missing a crucial piece of evidence or you believe we should change our approach, please let us know as with this document we are seeking to set out practical policies and solutions for rural areas for the next 3 to 4 years. Please note that soon we will be informing you about the

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national launch of this campaign and how we will promote this document into Government for consideration. For now, please note that we have plans to segment these chapters and distribute them to all relevant governmental departments. And to build a wide cross agency voice when addressing parliamentarians, we will also seek to discuss and consult all our members and partner organisations on this campaign. We will engage with MPs from Rural Constituencies through the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services for which the RSN provides the Secretariat. Additionally, we will seek to facilitate a rural group comprised of members of the House of Lords (predominantly involving those who previously sat on the HoL Select Committee on rural economy), who will enable us to press this case into Government, putting questions to ministers and utilising all available parliamentary processes to ensure that the Government is aware of rural issues. We believe that if the Government is genuinely interested in the levelling up agenda that they must address and engage with the rural economy and rural communities.

We would like to have the rural market town voice reflected in this campaign; therefore, we will review the chat to see if what was just discussed reflects what we already are saying in our campaign. Please note that this campaign will also consider the new challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as all other matters as we seek to keep this document and campaign live.

4. The RMTG Initial Recruitment Process Areas approached to join RMTG, seeking to establish the group across rural England.

David informed members that currently the group has over 140 members from across England and encouraged members to invite other rural market towns to contact us if they wish to join the group. We strongly believe that the more rural towns join, participate, and contribute to our joint discussions the stronger will be our position and voice when we engage and put pressure on the Government on behalf of the group.

5. RMTG Services

Member representatives took a short interactive poll exercise to assist in identifying and taking forward the service priorities.

Poll and Results:

1. How would you describe the situation in relation the commercial health of your Town Centre? (Single Choice)

- a) Generally doing quite well (6%)
- b) The situation overall is just about satisfactory (8%)
- c) The situation is not as strong as in previous years (33%)
- d) It is worrying in terms of future years (50%)
- e) It is very difficult currently with little hope in sight (1%)

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2. Is your council currently participating or running any schemes listed below: (Multiple Choice)

- a) Market based Proposals/Aspirations Schemes (19%)
- b) A Leisure based Proposals/Aspirations Schemes (14%)
- c) An Environmental Proposals/Aspirations Schemes (22%)
- d) A Socially based Schemes Proposals/Aspirations Schemes (8%)
- e) None of the above (31%)
- f) Not aware of any (33%)

3. Has your council or area previously benefitted from any European Union Funding schemes? (Single Choice)

- Answer 1: Yes (33%)
- Answer 2: No (47%)
- Answer 3: Don't know (19%)

4. Is your area benefitting from any LEP Funding schemes? (Single Choice)

- Answer 1: Yes (11%)
- Answer 2: No (56%)
- Answer 3: Don't know (33%)

5. Has the easing of lockdown during Summer 2020 brought any additional commercial benefit to your town or parish beyond the norm? (Single Choice)

- Answer 1: Yes (25%)
- Answer 2: No (61%)
- Answer 3: Don't know (14%)

6. From an employment viewpoint, how much do you think the Covid-19 related measures taken by the Government have impacted on local residents and businesses? (Single Choice)

- Answer 1: No significant impact in my area (3%)
- Answer 2: Some significant impact in my area (69%)
- Answer 3: Seriously affected my area (14%)
- Answer 4: Very seriously affected my area (14%)

From the above results **Graham** commented on the outcome of question 1 as about 83% of members show real overwhelming concern about future commercial health of their respective town centres. Second question had mixed results, but the overriding conclusion is that there is probably not much scope for new schemes in your areas due to the current pandemic. Unless councils had built up balances or reserves or attracted some external funding for projects. Third question about areas previously receiving EU funding showed some mixed results as well, with more 'no's' than 'yes'. While about question four, on LEP Funding Schemes, only 4 had benefitted from them with a larger majority who have not, which is quite worrying. We do acknowledge that for a rural area to benefit from a LEP Funding Scheme, the initiative that they look at must have a rural dimension considered in the first place. We can also see that in answering question five, only 25% stated that lockdown easing this summer has brought commercial benefit to your area, while 61% have not seen any benefit. We recognise that this question might be most relevant to those areas that rely heavily on seasonal tourism. The final question shows that majority of you believe that in terms of

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employment, your area has been significantly impacted by the measures taken by the Government during Covid-19.

David thanked all for participating in the poll.

Comments

Cllr Diane Ward, Uckfield Town Council:

Raised the point that during this lockdown large companies like The Range, Poundland, B&M etc are allowed to stay open due to selling some food items, unlike the small local independent shops, which rural areas rely on most. How can this be tackled?

Graham Biggs in response Cllr Diane Ward's question:

Graham thanked Cllr Ward for her query and noted that he will bring this point up on behalf of the group during the next fortnightly meeting of the Rural Impacts Stakeholder Forum with Defra.

6. Proposed RMTG online meeting schedule

9th November is our first RMTG meeting and the first RMTG Clerks Advisory Panel meeting will take place on Monday, 30th November.

We would like to consult members on the current schedule.

We propose having the following meetings a year:

- **RMTG meeting** – would take place **twice a year** and to which all nominated RMTG representatives would be invited.
- **RMTG Clerks Advisory Panel meeting** – a meeting that would include those clerks from each member council who are prepared to be involved in this group.

Most attendees agreed to the schedule outlined in this agenda. It was suggested that Clerks Advisory Panel meeting could be held after 7pm due to members work schedules. Graham emphasised again that before the next meeting we will be asking RMTG members for agenda items.

7. Currently Active Town Council Local Networks

We are seeking to identify other currently operating local (County) level networks across England, to see how we can work together. Therefore, we would like to consult our current members on the questions below.

- Are there an independent local grouping where market towns in your area periodically come together of their own volition? If so, how frequently does these groupings meet?
- Are there a County Council (or District Council) or other convened meeting where Towns meet independently of parishes? If that is the case how frequently does these meetings occur?

Comments

Apart from NALC meetings, majority of the members attending have indicated that they are not currently part of any such groups. While **Cllr**

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Linda Robertson (Midsomer Norton Town Council) mentioned that Bath and North East Somerset Council has setup a group of forums within their area (around 8 of them). Their town council is covered by the Summer Valley Forum, of which they are the biggest town. The group involves towns and parishes, where the agenda is set by the towns/parishes and not by our unitary council.

Graham and David asked if having a group of just towns in their district or unitary area (or towns as service centres, excluding small villages) be helpful or of use? Members mostly agreed that such a group would be of use.

Cllr Jonathan Davies, Penrith Town Council asked:

Could an online collaboration forum be established out of this group to continue the conversations between meetings? Graham agreed that the RSN would consider this.

8. RMTG on our website

We welcome any suggested changes and input from members.

[Please click here to view the RMTG page](#)

The group was informed how to use our RSN website, where to find further information on RMTG and its current members, and where to find more information on our future events.

9. RSN's Parliamentary Activities and work with the Rural Coalition

Graham informed the group on the work of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on rural services (APPG) of which we are the secretariat. We often contact MPs from rural constituencies, irrespective of party or if they have formally joined this APPG. We also have a separate group called the Rural Fair Share Group, which seeks to work with a group of MPs trying to address the disparities in local government finance between urban vs rural areas and other related financial matters. We also have contacts in the House of Lords, as we seek to establish a Lords group to help with our current Revitalising Rural campaign.

Graham mentioned the Rural Coalition before but expanded on its structure further. It is a group of 13 national organisations, all coming to the table and representing their particular interest. The CLA are members of the Rural Coalition, and they are party to the fortnightly discussions with Defra. We have a close relationship with the CLA. Every organisation that is part of the Rural Coalition has their own set of priorities and concerns and through the coalition we come together trying to find the common ground on rural issues and seeking solutions. In the last three weeks Rural Coalition has got quite a lot of publicity when it was indicating the first thoughts about the impacts of COVID-19 which was published prior the second national lockdown.

10. Any Other Business

An opportunity for members to offer their views on the group and discussed proposals.

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Comments

Cllr Anthony Hirons, Lutterworth Town Council:

Requested that in the next meeting the current changes made to planning legislation and planning system be discussed, as these changes will affect us all.

Graham Biggs in response Cllr Anthony Hirons question:

Graham agreed to raise this at the next meeting. He also highlighted that RSN has already made representations in relation to both the Planning White Paper and changes to the current planning system: this autumn the Rural Services APPG wrote to the secretary of state asking for a meeting to raise rural concerns directly with the minister. We will update members on the outcome of these discussions. Graham also mentioned that three weeks ago a ministerial round table on the Planning White Paper took place, where the housing minister from the Communities Department started the conversation by saying that this was the start of the discussion not the end. Which raised the question of why it was presented as a White Paper with intentions to legislate in the first place, rather than a green paper for further discussions. At that meeting Graham suggested that since discussions were just starting that they ought to stop the new changes to the planning system, which currently dramatically undermines the affordable rural housing provision as it allocates huge numbers of new housing to be built in rural areas, which did not get much of an answer. Nevertheless, it seems that they are open to genuine discussions. If you have any rural town issues that you think are important to consider, especially in relation to the planning system, please email us at admin@sparse.gov.uk. If members already made representations to Government or their council in response to the new Planning White Paper, then please feel free to send us a copy.

Graham thanked all in attendance and commented on the encouraging attendance and lively discussion in the chat.

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