

Dear Julie,

I refer to my correspondence to you back in the winter about the Rural /Market Towns Grouping. As you will have appreciated we approached Market Towns and Market Parishes on the basis of one per District or Unitary area across England (where the area involved has rural areas). You did ask we re-approach you at a later stage.

There is now an opportunity given the current situation that allows the Council to try our services and evaluate without any fee. We remain really keen for Kings Hill to join the RMTG, initially now on that basis.

We feel the phrase Rural Market Centre (often also called Rural Market Towns) has current relevance and importance across England. It is a term that collectively identifies a series of Towns and Parishes that have evolved in a historic way across the Country and it allows those Towns and Parishes who still on a day to day basis continue to inter react with their surrounding rural area to argue their important collective case. We attach the article about the Group.

Currently we have formed a Group of 85 + Council members. We are looking to double that. We unfortunately have not achieved current representation from the rural centres in Kent on this particular grouping at this time. We notice from your website you have a strong community role and it would come in to represent your form of rurality, as every market place and its surrounding rural area varies a little in the way it has evolved and consequently operates. We notice you a comparatively new settlement. We do need to achieve an accurate cross section from across the whole of England to claim we are arguing the consensus Rural Market Town case.

We appreciate the work and difficulties that local Councils have as a result of the COVID crisis. The towns and parishes deserve every congratulation for doing all they have done and continue to do for their communities and the people who live in them, during these dreadful times.

We are however also aware of the economic consequences that are already occurring and that further and yet more threatening situations are inevitable. It is really vital that at this time Market Town Communities across England establish and present their particular collective view and case. It is really important this is a cross national view and as said we want all areas involved in it. This group is uniquely equipped as the vehicle to take matters forward as we are a special Interest Group of the Local Government Association and are individually as the RSN arguing the rural case across England.

This is not a membership packed full of obligations. We plan to make being a member a reasonably easy task and member authorities can do as much or as little as they are able to at any one time.

We feel:-

- The COVID situation has proved that people in rural areas can become very isolated very quickly. The last material consideration of any overall focus on Rural Towns and Areas by Government was twenty years ago in the year 2000. We are pressing the Government for action for social and economic reasons.
- The Lockdown situation proved the obvious - that broadband is now as essential as Electricity and Fuel. We will continue to press the rural case very hard. All rural areas and rural towns need to have

reliable and fast broadband connection otherwise the consequences will be severe. It is over simplistic for Government and the industry to say all towns and larger villages now have good broadband and mobile phone coverage – there are rural centres let alone areas that clearly still do not.

- Stronger sustainable transport Links to Market Towns from surrounding locations are absolutely key for rural areas as the rural population average age is increasing at a faster rate than with the population in other areas of the country and services to Market Towns are the lifeline for many people.
- We feel the government underplays the potential of the rural economy in a rapidly changing era. Specific focus on rural towns and rural areas could be potentially a win- win situation both for rurally based residents and the national economy. We want to see rural England receiving specific thought and attention through a Rural Strategy rather than just being rolled up into overall national consideration, which as we all know is too often is urban centric.

You may recall that there was a small subscription (£130 p.a.) involved for clearly there is a need for the group to have continuity. We appreciate at this time however that may not be particularly appetising given the unforeseen expenditure that the COVID based work has occasioned councils.

The larger the Grouping the more respect it will undoubtedly receive through the coming choppy waters. Please could your Council therefore please consider the following:-

- We are happy for Kings Hill to come into Rural Market Towns Group from now until Thursday 1st of April 2021 without charge.
- The Council will consider before that date whether it wishes to continue (or not) its membership on a paid basis referred for the 21/22 financial year based on its assessment of the value of membership in 2020 and notify us of its decision around the time of the New Year.

Can you please let us know by the 14th August whether or not Kings Hill are prepared to proceed on such a basis. Please come back whatever the decision. We do need to know where the Council stands on this one. We do however need support at this time and we do think it is in your Parishes' overall interest to be involved so that a strong collective voice can emerge on a cross national basis at this critical time.

We look forward to hearing from you,

Yours Sincerely,

The Rural Services Network seeks to provide a voice for rural communities by representing rural services, networking between rural service organisations and establishing and broadcasting best practice in rural service provision. It comprises SPARSE Rural, the Rural Assembly, the wider Rural Services Partnership and the RSN Community Group. The organisation works with Rural England, a stand-alone Community Interest Company research group.

The Rural Services Partnership Limited is a registered company (0696 0646) in England & Wales. Rural England C.I.C. is a registered company (0902 3202) in England & Wales.

Hi Julie,

Further to our helpful chat last week here is the correspondence I referred to. I also include a summary of our case. I do hope Kings Hill can join us and work with us. I should perhaps have tried to explain that we have attempted to pick out settlements across England that vary from one another so there is no stereotypical approach and we can get a totally across rural viewpoint from council's inputs. Kings Hill is of particular interest to us as it is a relatively new settlement.

SUMMARY

Put simply we want to create a grouping of market/rural towns across rural England to evidence and promote the rural market town case to national decision makers.

Twenty years ago the phrase 'market town' was seemingly a reasonably recognised one nationally - including through some Lottery Funding. Now there is a real danger that this focus has faded with the current emphasis on "left-behind" urban towns. . That, we feel, is very detrimental to rural areas and the towns which support them. The rural towns have seen growth in population and the challenges that come with that but their case for national representation doesn't seem to have been brought together nationally, collated, evidenced and collectively argued for a while. There may be a danger their case may have become a little lost in national consideration of wider population growth and trends.

The phrase market town used to have a common root about the holding of a livestock (and produce) market and this is of course is no longer always the case. The phrase is however still common place in community descriptive terms throughout the country and can be employed for general identification of rural service centres and we believe therefore for collective purpose. There needs to be stronger recognition of the rural background of the country and its economic potential. We similarly feel that rural market towns need to have greater recognition for their role in serving their particular rural hinterlands.

Rural Towns serve communities across their whole rural hinterlands, often across a radius of 10's of miles - across rural roads. The RSN encourages Towns and their hinterland parishes to work together to support the essential needs for the economic, social and health wellbeing of the residents and businesses of both the town and the hinterland. It is the RSN's position that Towns are the hub providing retail, medical, recreational and business support to the whole area with the next nearest town often long distances away. Access by public transport from those rural communities to the rural town is a growing issue. The Government announced the first 100 communities to benefit from the towns fund based on various criteria including productivity, deprivation and investment opportunities - but rural areas may not have the critical mass or funding to compete on a level playing field with urban towns in national funding competitions. Hence the RSN's call for a bespoke allocation for rural towns in each funding package.

RSN has been representing rural areas for some twenty years. We work through small subscription as opposed to the Grant route because that is can provide a continual service as opposed to a spasmodic one. We have been able to assist in balancing the national debate in doing that. To establish a rural town grouping is the next logical step and we do think there can be mutual individual town and national benefit in that happening.

Our remit here therefore is:-

to establish and collate the national rural market town argument (establishing at the same time best practice and potential)

a representational role to ensure national recognition of that overall case

to ensure that in changing times as we leave Europe, Government and its MPs are fully mindful of the issues facing rural towns - and the potential of rural market towns and rural areas- and that Government acts accordingly.

We seek to establish a grouping that has clear support from numerous rural area centres across the length and width of England. We represent as an Local Government Special Interest Group Principal Local Authorities from c120 rural different Councils areas and we hope to replicate that in terms of a Rural Market Town Group pattern.

We are currently campaigning for Government to put together a comprehensive rural strategy at this time .

Put very simply we are convinced that in putting forward that call to Government there is a need of a collective rural market town grouping and that the rural market town case is unlikely to be heard if it is not established.

We realise that Government will only move if they feel there is pressure from Rural MPs and we firstly need to convince those MPs. To do that we need a healthy sized and varying grouping and for that reason we do need a strong start. Every town/parish that joins helps to assist their MP at least thinking the case through.

There are approaching 50 Councils who are backing the initiative already so we are reasonably on target. Here is the website link to the initiative which is on the RSN website

<https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/page/ruralmarket-towns-group>

Our present situation is a reasonably good one but the case clearly gets stronger with every key settlement that supports us.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Kindest Regards,

David.

Subject: A Rural/Market Towns Group of the Rural Services Network- Kings Hill.

Dear Parish Clerk ,

At this critical time for rural areas the Rural Services Network is seeking to establish a group of Rural/Market Towns to present the arguments as seen by Towns and Parishes in Countryside Areas.

We commence this initiative by writing out by e mail and by post to 200 communities spread throughout the rural areas of England looking for a strong starting response spanning the country. This is a special invitation to the Kings Hill Parish Council and the other Councils listed in the word document attached in the hope we all can all work together.

(We write by both e mail and post so that documentation is sent to the Council both in full written and electronic form to assist any circulation of the documents you wish to undertake).

We therefore attach here the relevant material setting out what we seek to do and why we are doing it. We would be grateful if you could present this to your Council and we very much hope that Kings Hill can come on board with us and work with us and the other invited towns and parishes at this important time.

The jpeg attachment shows how the new grouping will assist in presentation of the rural argument and assist the Call to Government for it to give focus to rural areas and their challenges and problems through a formal Rural Strategy <https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/time-for-a-rural-strategy>

Invitees range from communities with a population span of 3,000 to 30,000 who are situate in and serving a rural area. We have deliberately picked out large villages and towns so the whole of Rural England has been covered by this initiative as will be seen by the attached list of local councils being approached.

Please let me know that your council wishes to be involved in helping create such a group by 30th of November 2019.

You can do so by emailing me directly at david.inman@sparse.gov.uk or by post to Rural Services Network, Kilworthy Park, Tavistock, Devon PL19 0BZ .

If you wish to discuss this further feel free to contact me via e mail or by phone on 01822 851370.

We look forward to hearing from you and working with you.

Many thanks,