



Dear Okehampton Town Councillors,

The Rural Services Network is the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. Our main office is in West Devon. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation as a whole. We are a small but very committed organisation - the only one tackling rural services and seeking to set up a comprehensive rural network. We argue exclusively the national rural service case.

THE EXISTING RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

We have run an alliance of rurally based Principal Local Authorities for over 20 years. We currently have over 120 such local authorities engaged with our work. We have created strategic networks across services and at Westminster. Representing rural service partners organisations, the Rural Service Partnership, Around law and order; the Rural Crime Network. In Health, the Rural Health and Care Alliance. In parliament, we have introduced a Rural Services All Party Parliamentary Group, a Rural Fair Share Group and the Rural Lords Group. In terms of Rural Research, we have created the Rural England CIC. Rural areas by their very nature are disparate. However, they have to establish national rural consensus viewpoints from a range of service areas; look for rural best practice; and seek opportunities for rural representation to assist themselves. At a time when many other rural groups have had to close, by bringing people living and working in rural areas together, we can represent the rural case to purpose.

We feel that a Rural/ Market Towns Group is in the interest of both the towns and their surrounding rural areas. Towns of less than 35,000 in population act as the service hubs for their surrounding countryside and that role is fundamental to the economy of the town and the wellbeing of the surrounding areas. It is not possible to argue a comprehensive rural case without such a Rural/Market Town grouping coming into the rural equation. There was previously a Market Towns grouping we worked with but it found financial narrowing difficult. Over the last year we have established a new grouping of 150 rurally based towns at the very root of what has become known over centuries as Rural Market Towns. This phrase that once came out of ancient charters and livestock and produce sales now personify attractive, often historic communities that are the service hub on which the surrounding rural communities are themselves reliant. While the prefix Market is common the description by which the community calls itself varies. Some call themselves Towns, some prefer the continuation of the word Parish. It makes little difference - it is the hub activity of the largest community in an area and its interrelationship with its catchment that is crucial.

Why a Rural/Market Town Group now?

The RSN believes that Rural Communities and their Towns are frequently overlooked in a policy environment dominated by urban thinking and policy concerns. This often means communities either miss out on the benefits or experience unintended consequences from policies which are poorly thought through from a rural perspective. This means that government policy currently neglects the many hundreds of important rural towns across England. That can only be corrected if the case is made.

We believe these towns play a vital role not only in the lives of their inhabitants but also in both the local and national economy. That is why we want them to receive more focus. We will argue that it is in the overall national interest to do that.

Therefore, rural areas with their intricate network of differing rural communities should be able to realise their potential within the national economy. To do that they need to be appropriately recognised and supported in government thinking and actions.

What will it be?

To underline the importance of these rurally based English towns, the role they play and their potential going forward, the Rural Services Network have developed a new initiative to develop a Rural Market Town Grouping within the Rural Services Network. This new Grouping will work to add to our Call on Government for an overall Rural Strategy.

We have begun this RMTG initiative by approaching one town or the largest village in each of the 200+ rural areas across England which have been identified by Defra for their distinctive rural characteristic. This process is now being expanded to ensure that all those that wish to be involved are fully engaged.

Whilst we appreciate and celebrate the diversity of our rural areas, we seek to create a common united voice to represent all different types of rural areas across England ensuring that no form of rural area is excluded.

Up to until now we have in our group c 150 Towns and Parishes. It is now time to complete the sought network of 200 as well as opening out from there.

What service would the Council get back from membership?

Services provided to the group will include:

- Involvement in the Rural Strategy campaign to ensure feedback from member Market Towns is considered within the Revitalising Rural documentation and its updates.
- Cataloguing and disseminating good practice and learning material related to the key policy areas and delivery challenges or opportunities for rural/market towns.
- Receiving the 'Rural Bulletin', a weekly newsletter provided by the Rural Services Network highlighting rural news, issues affecting rural communities, and highlighting the work of the Rural Services Network.
- Provision of a dedicated quarterly newsletter 'Rural Market Towns Group Roundup' highlighting relevant latest policy developments, showcasing interesting member practice and flagging relevant initiatives or funding opportunities.
- Periodic online surveys of the members of rural/market towns, to gather comparative

information about topics of particular interest to this grouping.

- Free access for Councillor representatives or their nominee to the 9 topic RSN Cross Service Seminar programme.
- Twice yearly Rural Town Networking Meetings held online.
- Meetings of a RMTG Town Clerk's Advisory Panel.
- Whilst statistical information is almost always presented by Government at County and/or District level it is vital the messages this contains are known about across rural areas. We will issue an area rural statistical profile once a year to members of this grouping based on their nearest Principal Council area.
- The pattern of local area Market Town meetings seem mixed across England. We would like to look at this in a little detail to see if it is at all feasible to secure any improvement in areas where meetings/joint working are not taking place currently and also look at how liaison can take place between this national facing group and existing area meetings.

This is a comprehensive service using grouping to achieve a value well in excess of the small charge.

What cost is involved to the Council?

We recognise the service has to be affordable and therefore in overall budgetary relatively insignificant. It also has to be self-sustaining by being attractive to many councils. Eventually we would like to exceed 400 Rural Councils. For local councils of up to 5,000 population the annual charge will be £110 per annum, for those between 5,000 and 10,000-£130 p.a., and those over 10,000 in population a yearly subscription of £150. VAT has to be added but is normally recoverable.

Free Trial Period

We will give you free membership until the end of July 2021 as you request it.. You can take that service without commitment and decide whether you wish to continue with us next summer. If you decide to continue, we will then only charge you 66% of the annual fee for 21/22.

CONCLUSION

We have to come together to establish a common argument based on rural places which serve their catchments. We have to represent ourselves nationally to get our individual value recognised across the country and the importance of our 'market' role properly appreciated. The term Market Town or Market Place itself is a marketable commodity often now commonly used by the tourist industry as a descriptive phrase in guidebooks. Its importance is not however being fully appreciated in every quarter. By working together, we can demonstrate its overall value and achieve significantly more. We do hope you will consider this invitation as a Council and decide to join and to work with us. We attach this offer in a graphic version for copying and circulation to your members.

Many thanks for your consideration. Please do let us know your decision when it has been made. We very much hope Okehampton will join and we look forward to working with you.