Dear Mrs O Hagan,

We have for over 20 years been a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association representing Rural Services. We work on a membership basis and have a grouping of over 120 Rural Principal Councils across England, a grouping of some 200 rural non local government organisations (RSP), and a Rural Health and Care Alliance with some 69 health organisations. We also work with the Rural Housing Alliance and we founded both and work with a National Rural Crime Network and separate Research Community Interest Company, Rural England. Over the past eight months we have been establishing, incrementally, a Rural/Market Towns Group and it is in relation to that we are writing..

We are the sole organisation arguing the Rural Services case which we feel constitutes the operational spine for all people living and working across the 80 percent of England that is categorised as rural. There can be a tendency in England, as it is the most industrialised of the Home Nations, not to have any special focus on England’s rural areas and we feel that is dangerous. Rural areas have their own special problems and they do require continuing monitoring and sometimes consideration. We established therefore this Network to ensure rural areas have a joined up voice across services and we issue an E mail national Rural Bulletin every week. We feel English Rural Market Towns act as the rural service hubs and a cross national Grouping of them is really important for rural areas as a whole.

***We feel the phrase Rural Market Centre Towns has current relevance and importance across England. It is a term that collectively identifies a series of rurally based Towns and sometimes Parishes that have evolved in a historic way across the Country and it allows those Towns 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 a leaflet setting out our proposals and a list of the local councils working with us already. The RMTG will have its own entity and voice but will also be an operating part of the RSN.***

Our approach to Market Towns has been a careful one. In establishing a group we have deliberately not started by writing to every market town in every area or County. English rural does not come in one guise. In character it varies quite markedly from area to area and  its market towns are no exception to that because they have tended to evolve in a way that is representative of their particular area. If we are to successfully represent market towns we need to argue the consensus national case and to have a core membership that represents the character of all the market towns of England. It would not for example help establishing a core argument if many of the market towns came from the Lakes and none came from ex mining towns or if all the towns were in an equivalent population banding.. Our process in initial group formation has started by sending out some special 200 invites carefully ensuring we represent every geography and form of rural Market Town across England. We have also had regard to populations of towns. Our success rate has been somewhat more than anticipated maybe with one in every 2 or so coming on board so the initiative is progressing well nationally.  We are now ready to go forward with this Phase 2 and our approach is again one of carefully selecting specific types of market town.

Currently we have formed a Group of 92 Local  Council  members. We are looking to double that. We do not have current representation from the rural areas from the North Shropshire area on this particular grouping at this time.  We notice from your website you have a strong community role and it would assist if you would join to represent your form of rurality.  Every market place and its surrounding rural area varies a little in the way it has evolved its relationship and consequently operates.   We would again emphasise we 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 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 Towns 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 .***

This is however 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.

***There is a small subscription ( £110 p.a.) involved for clearly there is a need for the group to have operating continuity. Whilst we hope the fee is a reasonably affordable one we appreciate at this time however that any new outlay may not be particularly appetising given the unforeseen expenditure that the COVID based work has occasioned councils. We are therefore offering the opportunity of a period of free membership .***

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 Wem to come into Rural Market Towns Group from now until Thursday 1st of April 2021 without charge. That will provide you many months of free membership.

* The Council will however consider before 1st April 2021 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 towards the Spring in 2021.

Can you please let us know by the 30thof September 2020 whether or not the Town Council 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,

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**David Inman**

**Director of** [**Rural Services Network**](http://www.rsnonline.org.uk/)

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