

BRANCH LIAISON OFFICER

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Officers' Newsletter 220

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Dear All

It is already about two months since the last Officers' Newsletter was circulated – no excuses. However, sometimes other RCTS tasks get in the way but apologies for the delay. This one is quite long as it contains Regional Meetings information including the Agenda with accompanying notes, a short paper on branch funding as well as something that was requested by several branches last year ie short form quick checklists for branch officers to complement the more detailed information in the Officers' Handbook.

Requests, Reminders and Recruitment

A very quick reminder to those branches that have not yet submitted their Branch Returns for the half year to 30 April 2023 – these are due in by 15 May 2023. Submitting them within the deadline helps the Finance Team to complete their tasks in a timely manner so, if you have not already done so or provided a good explanation for any delay, please get them in quickly. I hope none is outstanding by the time that you read this newsletter.

Branches have returned to face to face meetings with some continuing with hybrid and or virtual meetings or a mix of all three. It has been some time since guidance was last issued with regards to running Zoom meetings but please keep good practice in mind to ensure that virtual meetings run smoothly and efficiently with respect for both the presenter and everyone in the audience.

Please will all branches make sure that they keep their fixtures up to date on their branch pages on the website. Please put the dates up even if you have not yet confirmed speakers. This helps the national Zoom meeting organisers to try and avoid clashing with your dates and helps Social Media Officer Tim Bellenger, wherever possible, to include specific meetings in social media posts. If you need help with this, please ask.

Society Zoom licences will be due for renewal again in July. It would be helpful if any branches interested in having one for the year 2023/2024 would let Matthew Shaw or Jeremy Harrison know.

We would all like new and younger volunteers to come forward and join our branch committees with fresh ideas, to share the workload and to allow older committee members to retire who have been giving of their time for, in some cases, several decades. Appeals often fail to get a positive response so it has been suggested that instead of begging, we invite anyone who is newly retired or considering retirement in the near future, to consider giving an hour or two each week to help run the branch committee. I have been directly approached by two such people recently and successfully put them in touch with their local branches. Ask them now before they become too heavily involved elsewhere!

National Officer Update

Unfortunately, Ronnie McAdam is temporarily unable to carry out his role as Publicity Communications Officer. For now you will need to contact Keith Merritt instead about getting details of branch meetings, activities and events into the railway press. At the moment he can be contacted on publicity@rcts.org.uk so please let him have details of any up and coming branch fixtures.

Regional Meetings

I am delighted that all five Regional Meetings are going ahead this year and by now, I expect that all branches will have been contacted by the person making the arrangements for their region. Any difficulties, please ask.

Appendices to this Newsletter

Appendix 1

Regional Meeting Agenda and accompanying notes

Appendix 2

Regional Meeting Discussion paper on branch subsidy from the centre

Appendix 3

Quick checklists for Branch Officers

(see Regional Meeting Agenda item 8a)

Thank you for your patience in reading this newsletter and if you have any queries regarding the appendices, please ask.

Kind regards

Irene

Appendix 1

REGIONAL MEETINGS 2023 – AGENDA

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- 1 Welcome by Chair and introduction of Delegates
- 2 Apologies for absence
- 3 Minutes of previous Local Regional Meeting
- 4 Matters arising from Local Minutes not covered by the Agenda
- 5 2022 Regional Meetings National Action Points
- 6 Matters arising from 2022 National Action Points
- 7 Branch Presentations – comparing how each branch has been doing since the last Regional Meeting – see note (i)
- 8 a) Officers Handbook – short form branch officer checklists – see note (ii)
- 8 b) Branch Officer training needs – see note (iii)
- 8 c) Updating Branch pages on the website (iii)
- 9 Officers' Newsletters – what do you think of the new format using Mailjet - see note (iv)
- 10 Branch finances
 - a) Reimbursements from the centre – see note (v)
 - b) Pay Pal donations – see note (vi)
 - c) Financial incentives for branches to recruit new members – see note (vii)
 - d) Should branches receive a payment each year from central funds – see note (viii)
- 11 Life Memberships - pros and cons; should they continue to be offered into the future? – see note (ix)
- 12 Trustee Presentation – including the Digital Archive and Photographic Archive Project
- 13 Confirmation of Chairman and Secretary for next year for those Regional Meetings where this is to change either by rotation between the branches or because of retirement
- 14 Any Other Business
- 15 Date, time and place of next meeting

Notes to go with Regional Meetings Agenda

- (i) Provides useful feedback for me as Branch Liaison Officer on how the branches are doing, what works, what does not work, what support might be helpful.
- (ii) Included as a result of comments received previously about what might be better, particularly for new branch officers – something short, not too daunting, easily assimilated. A paper with draft short form checklists is provided so please discuss, constructively criticise, and amend as required. The outcome will inform what is circulated to all branches for guidance, as part of the Officers' Handbook and also as a 'stand-alone' document. Your input would be appreciated to ensure that it will suit your needs.
- (iii) Following on from last year, what training might be useful to help you going forward, whether this is assistance with maintaining the branch pages of the website, taking on the role of branch treasurer, or any other branch role, some sort of general induction for new branch officers. What would help eg training videos such as those available on the Officers' section of the website, in person or virtual training sessions where practicable? It has been raised that further help with updating branch website pages might be useful. If so, what would you like and what would meet your needs? For new branch officers, would a buddying system with a more experienced officer from your own or another branch help?
- (iv) Feedback has generally been good but there have been comments that some prefer to access the Officers' Newsletter as an attachment to an email rather than a link within an email. I understand that this is to do with what electronic device is used ie smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop. Do you have any such difficulties or any particular preference? Please discuss.
- (v) This is aimed particularly at branch treasurers. When you complete your branch returns, do you have any difficulty with reimbursements? If yes, how do you think the system could be improved? It would also be helpful to know if you are happy with the current system. When you receive a payment from the centre is it clear what this is for? Please discuss with your branch treasurer beforehand if they are not attending. I am a branch treasurer so I have a vested interest in the discussion.
- (vi) PayPal is the system used by the RCTS for donations for virtual or hybrid meetings. The system of refunding donations intended for the branches was set up admirably quickly but has room for improvement. Would you like to see branches advised of donations on a regular basis and to be notified when the funds will be paid to the branches. A better system should also help the RCTS financial team. What would be helpful for your branch? Please discuss.
- (vii) The subject of financial incentives for branches to recruit has been raised before and has been raised again this year. Should branches be rewarded for recruiting new members even if a new member is allocated to another branch? If so, what system might work including the level of any payment; should the new member have to renew at least once before any reward is considered; should this be considered at all given that the Society already invests in recruitment from central funds? Please discuss.
- (viii) Should the branches receive an annual payment from the centre – taken from the subscription element when members renew? If it is felt that the branches should receive an annual payment from central funds, how should this be calculated and what, as a branch, would you expect to provide in return? This has been raised by a branch member. Please see the accompanying paper taken from an informal discussion on the subject. I would recommend everyone to have a look at the Society accounts presented at the AGM as well as reading the paper, before discussion.
- (ix) Life expectancy has increased over the years so on average it costs more to service life membership than previously. However, if the price of life membership is increased, this could put members off. Whilst existing life memberships should be honoured, of course, it has been recommended that no new ones should be offered. Please discuss the pros and cons.

Appendix 2

BRANCH FINANCES

(Notes from a discussion re branch finances on Wednesday 29 March 2023)

Background

The discussion was instigated as a result of a question asking why does the Society not pay a small amount to branches out of the membership subscriptions each year? A number of items were discussed including membership benefits, one of which is the availability of branches around the UK. Also discussed briefly was social media and improving the Society's presence, the Archive and Library at Leatherhead, statistics on RCTS website usage and how to encourage this, the clarity, or lack, of branch information on the branch pages of the website (including donations requested for meetings).

The idea is to build on and maintain the strength of the branches in more difficult economic times and given the current membership demographics.

The reasons for considering the initial proposition about subsidies to the branches has arisen for the following reasons:

The Financial Viability of Branch Meetings

Many branches are running their meetings at a loss, subsidising the costs from reserves (that will not last forever) and/or from book sales at meetings and at exhibitions. With exhibitions in some areas becoming less available than they have been in the past and costs of running meetings increasing, this may not be sustainable in the long term.

What can be done to cover increased branch meeting costs?

Request a higher level of donations, seek a cheaper venue, run fewer meetings, provide reduced facilities, 'cheaper' speakers etc.

What could be wrong with the above suggestions?

Higher donations, while still good value, might put some members and guests off from attending. A cheaper venue and reduced facilities are likely to be less attractive so fewer members and guests would attend. Having 'cheaper' speakers implies less good speakers which might mean a less varied and attractive programme which could also potentially put members and guests off from attending. Reduced attendance would put further pressure on the financial viability of branch meetings.

If a better venue can be found at a lower cost, that is a great bonus but very difficult, if not impossible, to do. Speaker expenses are also rising eg travel costs, providing refreshments prior to the meeting etc.

Subsidy to branches from membership renewal subscriptions

One way to enable branches to maintain a good standard of meetings both in quantity and quality, might be to directly subsidise branches financially specifically for that purpose from the membership renewal subscription. What would be an appropriate level of subsidy and how would this be financed in both short and longer term?

Constraints with the above possible solution

At present most of the renewals money goes to producing the *RO* with the remainder being insufficient to cover the rest of the Society's annual costs which are in turn covered from other sources eg donations and/or from reserves. So a subsidy to branches would have to be added to the costs of the renewal subscription for this idea to be viable in the longer term. Some members are not financially well off and may find an increase in renewal costs difficult.

What would be expected from the Branches in return for a subsidy

A minimum number of meetings.

Varied and attractive programme with good speakers.

Aspire to a combination of evening, afternoon and virtual meetings, where resources permit, to reach all current branch members, attract guests and possible new members.

A minimum standard of venue preferably with good universal access, parking on site or close by, reasonably close to public transport. Facilities for refreshments with tea/coffee as a minimum.

Taking into account local resources and circumstances, how should the above expectations be assessed?

Additional Considerations

A lot of branches have more difficulty in attracting active committee members than in funding their meetings. More active committee members means that the branch can do more to provide the membership benefits of an attractive and varied programme of informative and interesting meetings and outside visits. Better attendance would help finance a better programme of activities so attracting active new committee members is also essential.

Currently there is a financial disincentive for branches to convert non-members attending meetings into members, with most branches requesting a lower meeting donation for existing members as a member benefit. Would a subsidy help to overcome this disincentive?

Should new members joining under reduced price special offers be included in the calculations or only those renewing?

Should all branches receive a subsidy and how would this be matched to expectations of minimum standards for the branches to achieve?

If branch subsidy was considered, how could it be rolled out equitably eg fixed fee per member to their allocated branch, fixed fee per branch, some other criteria? What would be an appropriate level of subsidy?

How could such a system be monitored for effectiveness?

Footnote

This is about directly supporting branch activity from the renewal subscription but should also take into account local resources and circumstances and overall costs/benefits for the Society as well as the branches.

Appendix 3

OFFICERS' HANDBOOK

BRANCH OFFICERS – QUICK CHECKLISTS

Introduction

These have been produced at the request of a number of branches as a quick reminder to all branch officers especially new ones.

They are an addition to the much more detailed and comprehensive information included in the Officers' Handbook. For further detail, please see the Officers' Handbook which includes additional information on branches and branch activities incorporating elements of good practice as well as the RCTS structure, Trustee responsibilities and much more.

The following quick checklists are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive but a quick guide, so please look in the Officers' Handbook if what you need to know is not covered here or, alternatively, please ask.

Quick checklists cover the following subjects:

- 1 Branch Officer Responsibilities
- 2 Branch AGM
- 3 Branch Indoor Meetings
- 4 Branch Exhibitions and Events
- 5 Branch Outdoor Activities

BRANCH OFFICERS – QUICK CHECKLISTS

Basic Branch Officer Requirements

Each branch needs as a minimum Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer.

Chair

Branch figurehead

Chair: branch meetings, branch committee meetings, branch AGM

Coordinate branch/branch committee activities

Secretary

Main point of contact for the branch

Manage the branch membership list

Welcome new members to the branch

Take minutes of branch committee meetings, branch AGM

Treasurer

Manage the branch finances

Maintain the branch bank account(s)

Additional Branch Officers

The branch committee may include additional people who will take responsibility for the following:

Web Officer to keep the branch pages of the website up to date

Fixtures Officer to arrange speakers for indoor meetings and write the associated reports for the RO and website

Outdoor Fixtures Officer to arrange railway related visits and activities eg observations, and write the associated reports for the RO and website

Sales/Exhibitions Officer – to arrange sales of RCTS publications and other book sales at exhibitions and meetings

Specific Activities and Duties

Essential

Arrange the branch AGM

Arrange branch meetings

Update branch pages of the website

Desirable

Arrange outdoor fixtures

Attend exhibitions

Attend Regional Meetings

Attend Officers' Conference

NB - there is flexibility within any of the branch committee roles about how the tasks are shared and each task could be split as suits the branch committee. Other branch members can help at meetings and on the exhibition stand without having to join the committee.

BRANCH OFFICERS – QUICK CHECKLISTS

Branch AGM – quick checklist

Must be held annually and not more than six months after the end of the branch financial year.

Before the AGM

Arrange date, time, place for AGM

Advertise on the branch pages of the website and in the *RO*

Circulate notice of AGM to **ALL** branch members not just those on email circulation list

Circulate AGM agenda, and request for nominations to branch committee

Good practice to circulate Branch Annual Report and Accounts before the AGM

At the meeting

Make sure spare copies of the agenda, annual report, accounts and minutes of the previous AGM are available

Chairman should remind all present that only members can vote

After the meeting

Write up minutes including list of members present, apologies, proposers, seconders, outcome of any voting, committee members voted for and their respective roles (if specified)

Circulate minutes to all branch members and invite comments/correction from members who attended

Send copy of AGM minutes to the Branch Liaison Officer (preferably including branch annual reports and accounts)

Good preparation is essential to help ensure that the meeting runs smoothly, efficiently and to a reasonable time

BRANCH OFFICERS – QUICK CHECKLISTS

Indoor Meetings

Work out desired dates for meetings for the whole season

Work out if face to face (physical), hybrid or virtual meetings (can be a mix of all three)

Book venue for physical meetings

Confirm payment arrangements for physical meetings

Book speakers and agree subjects

Send details of meetings to *RO* for inclusion on branch fixtures listings

Upload details onto the branch pages of the website

Advise the Publicity Officer for fixtures to be included in the wider media

Closer to each meeting, confirm arrangements with speaker including any fees and expenses

Send meeting reminder to branch members and others on email circulation list

On the day of the meeting

Meet speaker as agreed

Arrive at venue in good time to make sure the room and equipment (eg projector etc) is set out as required

Ensure arrangements for break time refreshments are in place

Make sure someone is there to welcome members and guests, sign them in and take door donations as required.

NB A warm welcome to everyone is essential as there is only one chance to make a first impression and this could be 'make or break' for either a member attending for the first time or a guest.

Chair to ensure timings go according to plan for start time, refreshment/comfort break, questions and answers, branch notices

Vote of thanks to speaker

Mention next meeting date, time, speaker, subject and thank everyone for coming

Ensure the room is left tidy and secure as per arrangements with the venue.

EXHIBITIONS

Purposes:

- 1 Promote the Society, and the branch, and recruit new members
- 2 Sell RCTS publications and other RCTS items as appropriate
- 3 Raise funds for the branch by selling items acquired by or donated to the branch
- 4 Encourage branch members to become more involved with branch activities

Well In advance of the event

Seek out suitable events locally

Book stand and check payment arrangements for stand

Source RCTS publications etc

Source recruitment materials, sample ROs etc

Source second hand books and other items for sale

Set up list of volunteers to run the stand

Closer to the date

Confirm stand booking and payment arrangements

Confirm volunteers to run the stand

Confirm arrangements for transporting exhibition stand/table, RCTS recruitment materials, RCTS publications, second hand items for sale etc

Confirm arrangements for setting up beforehand and taking down afterwards

Ensure up to date price list for Society publications is available

Ensure prices of items for sale are clear on second hand items

Ensure information on any special membership offers is clear

Confirm arrangements for money from sales so all volunteers are clear (cash box, float, card payments if applicable)

Set up record sheets for recording sales

Arrange for publicity material to be available for the public at the event (eg re branch meetings etc)

At the event

Make sure all volunteers know what is expected

Welcome and friendly attitude towards all comers

Information readily available about the RCTS and the branch

Promote recruitment and benefits of RCTS membership

Ensure proper records of sales and recruitment activity are properly recorded

After the event

Check records of items sold

Check that takings match sales records

Advise branch treasurer re financial outcomes

Pay money into the branch account

Follow up new recruits as required

Follow up on any queries received

Review how it went and any changes that might be required in future

Thank all volunteers

Outdoor Fixtures

This can be visits to places of railway interest, observations or other railway related outings eg good places to take railway photographs

Visits to places of railway interest

Agree with committee about which suitable places to visit – eg heritage railway, signalling centre, depot, driver training simulator, rail excursion etc

Contact chosen place and arrange date and time including details for the visit and any costs/donations

Advertise to branch members

Advertise in the RO (if timescale allows) and on the branch pages of the website

Take list of those interested including some reserves where numbers are restricted

Make sure everyone knows when and where to meet and confirm any other arrangements

Observations

Organise in the same way as visits to places of railway interest although arrangements can be much more informal and flexible.

Good practice - if carrying out observations (eg at a railway station), if possible tell local staff that you are there and why. It is a good idea to have your RCTS membership card with you.

Good places to take railway photographs

As for observations, but make sure that access is either public or that you have the permission of the landowner for lineside viewings.

NB SAFETY FIRST – this is not just good practice but essential. Ensure that NO-ONE in the group trespasses on railway property and that safety measures are adhered to at all times.
