Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Rural Tourism in England, HC 428

Wednesday 25 January 2017

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Jim Fitzpatrick (Chair); Chris Davies; Simon Hart; Dr Paul Monaghan; Rebecca Pow; Ms Margaret Ritchie; David Simpson; Rishi Sunak.

Questions 284 - 335

Witnesses

I. Paul Forecast, Director, Eastern England, National Trust; Martin Lane, Director, Cotswold Conservation Board; and Sarah Fowler, Chief Executive, Peak District National Park Authority.

II. Kate Conto, Senior Policy Officer, The Ramblers; Roger Geffen, Policy Director, Cycling UK; and Mark Weston, Director of Access, British Horse Society.
Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Paul Forecast, Martin Lane and Sarah Fowler.

Q284  **Chair**: Lady and gentlemen, thank you very much for being here. Mr Forecast, Mr Lane and Ms Fowler, can I just ask you to introduce yourself and explain your position and your relevant organisations, for the record? Then we will move into the questions.

**Paul Forecast**: I am Paul Forecast. I am the regional director for the National Trust in the East of England.

**Martin Lane**: Martin Lane, Director for Cotswolds Conservation Board, responsible for the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

**Sarah Fowler**: Sarah Fowler, Chief Executive at the Peak District National Park Authority. I am also here representing the other 10 English national parks in the remit of National Parks England.

Q285  **Chair**: Thank you very much for being here and being prompt. We will move straight to the questions. Our names are around the table. I am Jim Fitzpatrick, acting Chair for the Committee at the moment. Our Chair is recovering from an operation. The first question is: English tourism is currently growing robustly. How confident are you that rural areas are reaping the maximum benefits from increasing numbers of overseas tourists in particular?

**Sarah Fowler**: I would sum up the growth as fragile. There is growth, and growth in rural tourism is about akin to what is happening elsewhere. The biggest value we can see is a clear focus on clarity of the offer on rural tourism. Looking at some national parks, the Lake District, for example, has seen about a 10% increase in growth following the floods last year. The focus really is about doing more work to encourage visitors to very iconic countryside destinations. Wales and Scotland are very good at recognising good landscapes and wildness, and there is more we can do in England to promote our protected and iconic landscapes and national parks.

**Martin Lane**: Just following on from Sarah, there is work to do, I would suggest, in terms of the join-up and the offer, and seeing it from the visitor’s perspective. We tend to fragment an iconic landscape such as the Cotswolds. Instead of looking at that as one offer and one comprehensive set of management and marketing activity it gets fragmenting into either county council or sub-areas and that is not the best way of providing that information and the quality of offer for the visitor.

**Paul Forecast**: The National Trust has seen a really good growth in terms of visitors to all of its properties across England. We had record levels from last year. It is fair to say that in some locations and
particularly rural locations, some of that is less strong than in other areas. We see this as an opportunity, particularly looking ahead to see how we might invest in growing some more rural areas.

Q286 Ms Margaret Ritchie: How do you rate VisitBritain’s and VisitEngland’s performances in marketing rural tourism both at home and abroad? How effectively can destination market organisations or destination management organisations market rural areas in competition with domestic and international organisations with much greater resources?

Paul Forecast: They are obviously doing a good job in the sense that tourism is continuing to grow. What we would say is that it is probably some of the big, iconic locations in the country that benefit the most. Places like the Lake District, Giant’s Causeway, and Fountains Abbey are very strong but probably away from that we are seeing less growth.

Martin Lane: In the question you posed you interchanged “marketing” with “management” in terms of the destination management organisations. We would emphasise the management element within that. At times I would suggest that the approach is more akin to a marketing effort and forgetting the need for the management of those landscapes, be they special landscapes like national parks and AONBs or be they wider rural landscapes.

Considering campaigns like Countryside is GREAT, I would say that the policy that was being used for destination management organisations at the time when they were first launched sounded fantastic. However, instead of then concentrating on key destinations of the DMO, virtually every local authority or every county authority has wanted to see itself as a destination management organisation. However, as I say, the management soon gets overlooked and marketing steps to the fore.

Sarah Fowler: The focus of VisitBritain and VisitEngland has traditionally been on the big brands and the big, traditional locations. The Countryside is GREAT campaign was a good campaign. It was helpful. We supported that as national parks. However, there is a missed opportunity here to really position the big countryside iconic brands better. I would put national parks in that list. National parks are an international brand, known well to international visitors. They are an iconic brand. There are in the nation’s psyche and in some sense they are actually as large as some of the mini-cities in terms of the number of visitors that go to them. Thirteen million come to the Peak District, for example. There is a missed opportunity on promoting those iconic brands in a very clear and very consistent way.

In terms of DMOs and more place-based DMOs, they are a result of their funding and a result of their governance arrangements. Currently their funding arrangements are very much largely supported by businesses. They very much promote locations and attractions, rather than promoting wider places. In terms of funding, there is a large county council support of them and therefore we tend to see that they promote administrative
boundaries more than they promote what the public connect with, which are landscapes and destinations.

**Q287**  
**Rishi Sunak:** Good afternoon, everybody. Do you have any thoughts about what more either councils or Highways England could do to improve signage towards rural tourist destinations? The obvious example is brown signs but, even beyond that, if you had any thoughts they would be welcome.

**Sarah Fowler:** Yes, I do. I am really pleased you asked that question, so thank you. We look across the national parks in Scotland and Wales as well, and our sense is that in Scotland they get it in terms of signing Loch Lomond and signing the Cairngorms. Highways England could do a lot better and we have approached them. They are reluctant to recognise national parks as destinations; the legislation is sometimes hampering them in terms of brown signs and in terms of what they can and cannot do. However, even putting that to one side, there is a lot more they can do.

For example, when you go over a major river, you get the river being named. When you go across some of the major motorways, sometimes you have no idea you are going past a national park. The Peak District is very invisible in our strategic road network. The chief executives of the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales last month contacted Highways England about the extension. In essence you now have, through the Lune Gorge along the M6 between Junctions 37 and 38, two national park boundaries backing onto the motorway. The response to the request about promoting the national parks there has been lukewarm. There is a meeting coming up but if there is anything you can do to get really good clarity and a consistent message on signage for national parks that would be great.

**Martin Lane:** I have nothing specific on Highways England to add. A growing number of protected landscapes, AONBs and national parks, look to identify boundaries with their logos or what-have-you, to try to create some of that local identity. The approach from highway authorities can be variable in our experience. We are dealing with 15 different local authorities. Across that, you have a range of attitudes and approaches to boundary signs.

**Paul Forecast:** The National Trust has been very grateful that our logo on our sites makes it very clear. There are some real advantages to that. We have 4.5 million members and you can imagine they tour around the country and visit different properties, so making sure there is clear orientation is really important to them, and it is really important for rural tourism that somebody living in the South-East is able to find somewhere to go to in Norfolk. I would agree that in terms of the amount of signage that there is there, it is variable depending on the local authority.

We certainly get feedback from some of our members that some of our sites are quite difficult to find. The final point I would make is that
particularly in rural locations that are perhaps less famous, brown signs play an important role of giving a sense that the place is important by having a kind of critical mass; if you see four or five brown signs as you go around, you get a sense that the place is more important and has got more to offer.

Q288 **Rishi Sunak:** Very briefly on that specific point about National Trust properties, is it the case that they automatically qualify for brown signs in a way that national parks do not?

**Paul Forecast:** They do. Our contention would be more around whether they are visible enough and coming off main roads and stuff like that. It is more a question of whether there are enough of them.

Q289 **Chris Davies:** I was interested in your evidence there, Ms Fowler, because in a previous panel when we had mentioned brown signs, the Committee was quite shocked that there seemed to be some opposition towards them. I was taken aback certainly, and I served on a national park authority before coming into this place; it was very difficult to get any signs of any sort up through the national park authority. I am quite surprised that you are encouraging brown signs whereas other evidence and other experience has shown that they are not being encouraged.

**Sarah Fowler:** Let me help with that distinction. When I talk about Highways England, I am talking about the strategic roads network. There is scope for the strategic roads network to promote, as Paul has said, the destination, the location and the place. When we talk to Highways England, we talk about brown signs being places to direct visitors to a particular attraction and therefore the ability to recognise a national park is therefore very difficult on brown signs.

In terms of your point about the number of signs within national parks, we do work closely with the highways authorities—often those are the county councils—to look at how we can work with them to reduce clutter of signage and so that signage is in keeping with the landscape that it sits within and the context it sits within. Our work with highways authorities locally is around how we can ensure that the signs are put up in keeping with the landscape.

Our comment about Highways England and connection to national parks are putting it on the strategic road networks and recognising national parks. For example, the lakes on the strategic road networks is called “The Lakes” or is called “South Lakes” rather than called “Lake District National Park” or “Yorkshire Dales National Park” or “Peak District National Park”. A consistent approach, recognising national parks and those iconic landscapes, is what I was wanting to share with you.

Q290 **Rebecca Pow:** Thank you, and apologies for being late. The subject of brown signs is interesting. Correct me if I am wrong but I am of the view that the purpose of the brown signs that Highways England put on is to do with numbers of traffic. They are not there for a tourist function.
They are not to help promote tourist attractions. You only get a brown sign if you can demonstrate X number of vehicles that are causing a concern, so they need to be directed. I wonder what your views would be on whether we need to change that to serve a better function.

**Sarah Fowler:** There are two types. When we talk to Highways England, they say that brown signs are there to direct visitors to locations and attractions.

**Q291 Rebecca Pow:** They are there to direct. They are not there to promote tourist attractions are they?

**Sarah Fowler:** They are paid for by the operator. There are also road traffic signs and when we talk to Highways England about putting road traffic signs up that talk about the Lake District National Park being here, the Peak District National Park being there, and the Broads Authority being there, they come back to us and say that road traffic signs only permit signs indicating the boundary of an administrative area. They say the boundary of a national park is not permitted on their road signs. I can share more evidence with some conversations we are having with them if that helps. Two of our national parks have a meeting with one of their area asset managers next week to help explore this further.

**Rebecca Pow:** Should we, in our report, be highlighting that there should be some sort of change or that they should be multipurpose?

**Chair:** That is clearly a conclusion we may very well want to draw in our recommendations.

**Q292 Simon Hart:** I had a message from a tourist attraction yesterday to say that they were in negotiation over the provision of brown signs and were told that because of the Welsh Government requirement in terms of road safety that the quotation of the bare minimum of the A40 for a fairly small business was £34,000. Anything less than £34,000 would not meet the criteria as laid down by Government. In a way it is a pointless thing. They cannot possibly afford £34,000 for a single sign. Have you heard of this in England, or is this problem unique to Wales?

**Martin Lane:** I have certainly not heard of a scale of costs of that order. Leaving aside the discussion about parks and the strategic road network but the visitor destination, the attraction, asking for a tourism sign, locally, within the Cotswolds, I would say there has been a great variation of approach from a one-stage, fairly low number of destinations and attractions being successful at seeking brown signage. More recently, I would say the policy has become far more variable. People have started to question the roadside clutter and the signage clutter. However, in terms of the scale of costs of that, I have not come across those.

**Simon Hart:** I just wondered if it was a problem you had come across.

**Q293 Chair:** Finally, Ms Fowler, we have been told by Highways England that there are different reasons given for why signs are not accepted, such as there already being too much clutter, damage to the environment and
road safety. Do send us whatever you think is relevant because we would be very interested in seeing that, and Rebecca is very interested. However, is there consistency across England in terms of the reasons you are given or does it vary depending on who you are talking to?

**Sarah Fowler:** What we would like to achieve is a consistent conversation with Highways England about how national parks are signed on the strategic road network. We have had individual conversations and we would really value that strategic conversation with them.

**Q294 David Simpson:** You are very welcome to the Committee. How effectively do Government policies and programmes balance economic aims and promoting tourism with protecting the environment and character or the rural places?

**Paul Forecast:** We are at a critical time in terms of the choice of what we do next in terms of investment. From our perspective, it is really important that there is a rich natural environment and that is an incredible opportunity. From our perspective as we go into discussion about what happens next, particularly with CAP, there is an opportunity to think about how we diversify the way that we spend money in order to diversify our business in particular. We know that the tourism industry is 10 times larger than the farming industry, so it provides an opportunity there to invest in rural tourism. We know that people going for rural trips want to see a wildlife-rich environment in terms of what they are going there to see.

There is an opportunity to think about how we invest differently to improve the natural environment and improve the built heritage environment. I do not think it is necessarily a compromise, as sometimes we talk about, in terms of whether bringing people in and the natural environment is an issue. From our perspective, the big things that are of concern are issues of planning and development, issues of climate change, issues of introduced species, etc. People going to enjoy naturally beautiful sites is not a major consideration that cannot be managed.

**Martin Lane:** The future negotiations in terms of the exit from Europe give us some fantastic opportunities. There is the Environmental Audit Committee report, in terms of looking at paying for public goods and services, and a lot of people are signing up to that approach. I would suggest that currently rural landscape is no real respecter of administrative boundaries on occasions, or indeed very often. We have an uncanny knack of wanting to group and gather our investment around administrative units. I have alluded earlier to the visitor not caring, quite frankly, if they are in Northumberland National Park or Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, whether they are one side of an administrative boundary or another. They are visiting that landscape. Therefore, how we gather information together should be on that scale.
Similarly, when we come to make investments, a farmer and their immediate markets are not particularly respecters of whether they are in one county or another. They may be in a valley and they are in financial dialogue with their neighbours who may be in a different county but their market area is that landscape. I feel at times that we break those landscapes down into a set of far too small administrative units. When we break them down into those the units the funding that one farmer might varies from what their neighbour may get, and therefore we lose a consistency of policy and we lose a consistency of investment.

**Sarah Fowler:** Enshrining in law the current legislation we have for protecting wildlife, for natural wildlife, for natural heritage and the whole national parks legislation that set us and AONBs up has been incredibly valuable. It set out what makes these landscapes special and it set out a framework of how we can keep them special as they evolve, obviously with times but maintaining that special nature.

We also welcome the Government’s eight-point plan on national parks that was published recently. That recognises that virtuous cycle between people enjoying the landscape and, if they enjoy the landscape, feeling moved to care for it. That is absolutely the role of national park authorities, AONBs and in fact the National Trust as well, in terms of getting that virtuous cycle operating and getting people out to enjoy and feel close to those landscapes and nature so that they can look after it.

Our challenges include the support to rural farmers, because farmers and land managers are the ones that keep that landscape special. Another is sustainable transport to enable people to get into and visit in a sustainable way. Another is how we can extend the stay and extend the spend of visits to these landscapes.

There is also visitor management as well, and that is actually a large chunk of what we as national park authorities do. We own a very small percentage of the land and the landscape. We work across the whole landscape in terms of publicising codes of conduct, encouraging public and sustainable transport and the traffic management. For example, in the Peak District, we manage at very busy times of the year the whole way the traffic moves around for some locations like the Goyt Valley and the Upper Derwent reservoirs. We engage with large groups and large organisations that want to come and enjoy that landscape.

In essence, there is support for the legislation and for the work that we do, and our role as destination management organisation working with partners is crucial in this.

**Q295 Dr Paul Monaghan:** Good afternoon. Just picking up on the environmental theme, the Committee would be interested to know what your organisations are doing to minimise the impact of large groups of people on the environment, perhaps by encouraging a more equitable distribution of tourists across the countryside and not just focussed on the so-called honeypot sites.
Paul Forecast: Part of our remit is obviously to provide access to the nation. The fact that we have 500 sites across the country, plus hundreds of miles of coastline, does dissipate and push down the impact. A lot of our visitors are very local. We are providing for local visitors. The other thing to say as a positive trend is that there is a move away from just summer and spring visiting. The visiting model that we say probably 20 years ago is very different. You go up to places like North Norfolk that would have been dead from October through to March. They are now rammed with people who are coming for all sorts of different experiences. There is a way of spreading it in a temporal way.

There is also one that is thinking about the fact of visiting being an opportunity to talk to people about having to care for the environment that they are coming to see. In actual fact the greatest way that we are going to conserve these places for the future is if people care and they contribute to organisations like the National Trust and they contribute by spending in the local economy. For me, I do not see it as a barrier. I see it as a massive opportunity to protect those sites.

Clearly there are always going to be some practical problems; if you go and visit some of our sites in the middle of winter and they have been popular, clearly they are going to be churned up and stuff like that. However, those are manageable. They are very practical things that you can get round. For me, the thing of having more sites, having that education by participation and coming and visiting is a really positive thing.

Martin Lane: The honeypots have their role, their purpose and their advantages in terms of the investment that is made in the infrastructure. That concentration at times serves a good purpose. However, the Cotswolds has the advantage of good accessibility in terms of, as Paul was indicating, you not getting quite the downturn in numbers. The tourism season is there operating, with maybe particularly high numbers during the season, but throughout the year, with long weekends or mid-week stays and such-like, the numbers are higher than they might be and the differentiation between seasons is not so great.

In terms of us saying, “Okay, there are those honeypots, how can we utilise those and spread the load—”

Q296 Dr Paul Monaghan: It is also about protecting the environment.

Martin Lane: Yes. However, there is an element of spreading the load and making people aware of those opportunities in that wider environment. If it is looking at bus services in terms of enabling people to get out and about over a wider geographic spread and experience a series of destination by public transport, we have seen public transport take severe cuts; if we want to facilitate that, we need to invest in it.

People increasingly want a visitor experience and to learn something at the same time, as can be seen with the guided walks programmes and
Q297 **Dr Paul Monaghan:** Are you arguing that tourism and education go hand in hand?

**Martin Lane:** They can be very hand in hand. We are not alone, but we are developing that into a Visitor Giving programme whereby the visitor and the tourism establishment actually make a financial contribution back into the landscape. It is only voluntary at this point in time and it is a programme that needs a long time to develop. That shows the interest of the tourism sector and the interest of their visitors. They increasingly realise their businesses and their stays are dependent on a high quality landscape.

**Dr Paul Monaghan:** Maybe, Martin, you could give us some written information about that education programme that you are speaking about. Would that be possible?

**Martin Lane:** Yes, sure.

Q298 **Dr Paul Monaghan:** Sarah, do you have anything to add?

**Sarah Fowler:** I would just to say it is part of our whole role as national park authorities. We are set up to for two purposes. One is to protect and care for the landscape, and the other one is education to promote understanding and promote enjoyment. As I said, that virtuous cycle is important to us to get that connection. There is a lot of work that we as national park authorities try to do to reach out to those communities that are less well represented in national parks.

If you look at the Peak District, we are surrounded by about 20 million people who live within an hour’s drive. It is reaching out to those communities that do not necessarily enjoy it to come and feel connected and inspired and want to look after it. Our role really goes all the way through from looking after the core basic infrastructure—the toilets and the car parks—all the way through to providing those experiences and opportunities for people to come and feel really connected to it.

I would just like to finish off on the honeypot sites. I have three things to say, if I may. One is that there are roles here for VisitBritain and VisitEngland. If you look at the Countryside is GREAT campaign, what was unfortunate about that is that it focused on the sites that are well known. It focused on the Lake District. It focused on Hadrian’s Wall. What we are wanting to do is say, “If you go onto this national park, come and enjoy that one”, and spread it out. We are, as 10 English national park authorities, working together with VisitEngland and we will hear on Friday whether we have been successful about working together on a developing product in that way. That helps spread out across the
national park family. We also do that locally in each of our national parks as well in the way that we promote visitor services and promote opportunities elsewhere.

Q299 Dr Paul Monaghan: I know that Paul wants to come back. I just have a very specific question to you, Sarah, if I can. The Committee has in its evidence received some criticism of the Peak District National Park in terms of the decisions that have been taken to exclude motorcyclists from the area and that this is constraining tourism opportunities in the area. Do have a response to that?

Sarah Fowler: Regulation is one of the tools that we do use to promote quiet enjoyment of the landscape. If I have picked it up correctly, we have put in place four traffic regulation orders across the national park in small locations where the landscape, the environmental quality and the opportunity for quiet enjoyment and tranquillity are at risk from 4x4 vehicles and motorised vehicles in small sections. We go through a very thorough options analysis to look at what the options are. We do not always go to regulation first. We look at voluntary constraints as well.

Q300 Dr Paul Monaghan: Sorry to interrupt but the evidence suggests that it is motorcycle access to the countryside that you are restricting that is holding back some tourist trade.

Sarah Fowler: That applies here as well. It is not just 4x4s. It is two-wheel as well as four-wheel access. I think it is the traffic regulation orders. There are four in place. We go through a rigorous consultation procedure. When we have gone through that process and procedure and listened to all the evidence, it is a transparent decision-making process that says what is best for a location. We are doing this in a small number of locations. We can see the evidence of the benefits of putting on that restriction. We do not do it wholesale.

Paul Forecast: Just coming in, one of the great things is obviously that the issue we are dealing with is that there are these honeypots where lots of people are going. There is obviously an innate demand in the British and English public to go and see these wonderful places. What I would say is that the distribution of beautiful wildlife-rich locations is actually quite fragmented. If I thought about my own location in the East of England, you have North Norfolk, the Suffolk coast and the Brecks, etc. However, you also have areas where many people live where the countryside is much more denuded and less beautiful as a result of lack of efforts to increase wildlife and improve the environment.

Again, as we move into new arrangements for CAP, there is an opportunity, given there is this innate demand for more rural tourism, to both spread the load away from existing honeypots but also to bring it closer, which again addresses things like transport where you are bringing the attraction closer to the people so that they do not have to travel as far. There is an opportunity there.
Ms Margaret Ritchie: Moving onto planning issues, how effectively do planning policies achieve a balance between tourist business needs and environmental and amenity concerns over new development, and, in that respect, should planning policies in national parks be amended to allow tourism business more flexibility to expand? If yes, how?

Sarah Fowler: In national parks we are the local planning authority. I describe our role as a local planning authority as planning with a purpose, planning for looking after the landscape and planning for promoting the social and economic wellbeing of the communities that live there. If you look at the evidence that comes back in terms of the number of applications we approve, the number of appeals we have, the satisfaction with our service and the timeliness, actually there is fairly good evidence to show that as local planning authorities we are doing a pretty good job. To the year ending March last year, national park authorities across England had about 7,000 planning decisions and we approved and granted 90% of those in national parks. The average is 88% so in terms of us approving, we are actually doing well.

In terms of your question about recreation and tourism and the balance between them, we take a proactive and positive to planning, and our proactive approach is to protect and enhance the special qualities, because after all it is that beauty and wonder that people want to come and visit and see. We do that for the benefit of visitors, residents and businesses that work there.

As an example, we are about to finish a consultation on some of our development management planned policies in the Peak District, and that does include a recommendation that we are looking at recreation sites and pubs and how we can look to bring forward a guidance about how we can manage visitor pressure in those locations and support recreation hubs, so support development and manage visitor pressure and look after special qualities. We recognise it is something we are continuously wanting to look at and evolve. All of it comes back to this special qualities and the whole reason national parks were designated.

Martin Lane: Whilst the Cotswolds Conservation Board is modelled the same and has the same purposes and the same social and economic duties as the national parks, we are not a planning authority. That is left with the local authorities. In that regard, I do not have quite the same level of detailed response. All I would say is that planning in general has stood us in extremely good stead.

Those robust planning policies have ensured that we have the quality of landscape that we have. For the Cotswolds in particular, of the protected landscapes it is that mix of landscape and settlement that makes up that landscape. We are not the extreme landscape of the Lakes and such-like. That blend of development with landscape has worked well. At the end of the day, it comes down to the location, the scale and the degree of impact. We are dependent on our local authorities taking forward NPPF.
**Paul Forecast:** I agree. The planning frameworks we have in place have served us incredibly well in a crowded island. One of the things that I sometimes do not think we get quite right is often the environment and tourism and the economic are couched as separate things, and if you accept that rural tourism is a very big contributor in its own right, often we look at these things as isolated things. It is a bit like the example of the motorbikes. This is an isolated planning application about something specific, but what we are not able to do is say, “Actually, how does that affect the 300 or 400 bed-and-breakfasts that are dependent on this looking and feeling like a very natural and beautiful landscape. Sometimes we miss that bigger picture view when we are looking at something that is very specific.

**Q302 Chris Davies:** Martin, you just outlined the way that your authority, for want of a better phrase, works. We have heard some criticism—forgive me, Sarah—of national parks having planning duties. Do you think your model is a successful model and planning duties should go back to local authorities rather than be vested in national park authorities? Not that I am putting you on the spot or anything.

**Martin Lane:** Sarah and I should have had a longer discussion outside. Forgive me, but Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are so designated to conserve and enhance their natural beauty.

**Q303 Chris Davies:** Just to clarify for the record, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty do not have planning facilities either.

**Martin Lane:** You had a national park designated for conserving and enhancing natural beauty and developing greater understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities. That is why national parks were designated. They had two purposes. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty were designated for a single purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty. However, in the Cotswolds and the Chilterns, we have put in place a management mechanism, which actually borrows from the park authorities, and the purposes that we are given are the same as a park authority but the planning still rests with the local authority. You can argue and we could have a long discussion about the pros and cons of the different merits of that. With the Cotswolds being resourced in the way it is at the present time, it would be impossible to take on planning responsibilities.

**Q304 Chris Davies:** I am not talking about you taking on planning responsibilities; I am talking about planning responsibilities being removed from the national parks.

**Martin Lane:** I do not know the details of the park authorities in terms of planning. I know the South Downs has brought in a slight variation about the way that they have looked at planning but I would not be able to comment on the South Downs versus—

**Q305 Chris Davies:** I will shortcut your answer because I know the Chairman wants to push on. Does your model work?
Martin Lane: Yes. Our conservation board mode works extremely well.

Sarah Fowler: If I may, given the reference to national park authorities, I have three things to say. Paul put his finger on the first one, which is that you need to look at the bigger picture and understand the bigger picture. Sometimes you can look at a particular planning issue and forget that wider picture.

The second thing is that I ask for the evidence to show it for itself. The satisfaction rate that we get in the Peak District is about an 82% satisfaction rate. We do regularly ask. We have had a planning agent come back to us saying they deal with a whole load of planning authorities and we are the best, in terms of the ones they deal with. The NFU has come back to us recently and said they were very pleased with our proactive and positive approach. That is one lot of evidence.

Another lot of evidence is that this has been looked at in the past and has been asked in the past. For example, in the Broads 10 years ago there was a question about that, and the outcome showed that it was actually more efficient, timelier, gaining more approval and a cheaper service by running it in the Broads national park authority. The same was done in a Welsh review recently. The same was done when Northumberland Unitary Authority was created. The same was done with the South Downs. All of them have identified that it is actually positive to reside with the national park authorities. I accept we will not get a 100% satisfaction rating. Maybe that is what is being asked, but the evidence speaks for itself.

Simon Hart: If it is so good, which it sounds like it is, would you have any objection to national park planning authorities being elected positions, as they are in local authorities, to give that excellent service true accountability? If you do not want to answer that now, maybe we can talk afterwards. It is not the question I wanted to ask.

Paul Forecast: For the National Trust some of it has been by design and some of it has been organic. Concerning the organic element, as we have become more affluent as a nation, the ability to go on more weekend trips and spend money on recreation has got even more. We have seen that trend continue, so there has been an organic element. What the Trust has done is a very simple thing, in some respect: it has opened our properties. We did have a traditional model of them being open from Easter through to the end of September. Now many of them are open throughout the year.
The other thing is programming as well, and looking at events and things that bring people in, like food. Christmas is a big thing for us in terms of providing an alternative offer that makes people visit at different times. There is also the natural environment.

Interestingly, from past experience, if you take a site like Minsmere, which is owned by the RSPB, during the summer months you have very traditional family tourists going there who are going because they are on holiday, but actually the main wildlife attractions are during the autumn and the spring. You have a very different demographic. It is really a practical example of you being able to have different audiences at different times and also alter your marketing in order to reach out to those audiences.

**Martin Lane:** Location is key in terms of the Cotswolds being accessible from the Midlands, the South-East and the South-West. It means that it has certainly flattened out the peaks and troughs and has extended the season. As Paul said, the affluence, the short break, the mid-week break and the long weekend break have helped to achieve that as well. I also sense that there is work in terms of packaging together and providing information for people to almost give them a helping hand as to what is on offer and how they package elements.

The general reaction to using public transport is, “It will never work. I will get back late. I will miss the bus. It will have gone without me.” Generally, rural people who are providing those services in rural areas know that buses might need to wait an extra 10 minutes; otherwise, people get marooned, etc. We need to package information together and make public transport and access to public transport more fun and a reliable adventure, and then we can help to extend seasons.

**Sarah Fowler:** Just very briefly, there is a lot that others do and there is a small contribution that we as national park authorities make as well. I will just give one example, which is around international dark skies. A number of national parks are promoting dark sky festivals, which promote visiting in the shoulder months and in the winter as well. That is across a number of national parks.

Q307 **Rebecca Pow:** My question is going to be very much relating to walking and access. I wondered what your views might be about what the record of local authorities is like in maintaining national trails and public rights of way.

**Paul Forecast:** It is on the whole pretty good in the area that I work in. We recognise that it probably is a little bit under strain in the sense that the clearance of footpaths is getting less prevalent. For us, particularly around the national trails, we are keen to see that the coast path is completed. That will be something that will be of massive benefit and will be quite iconic. We would also like to make sure, because we have seen divestment, that we are actively promoting these things, actively promoting people getting outdoors and actively promoting the national
trails. We have seen some of that disappear. There is certainly a sense that there is less promotion going on than previously. Obviously, we, as the National Trust, do quite a bit ourselves in terms of the maintenance and management of our trails that cross our sites, so we are contributing.

Rebecca Pow: So you have no worries about funding, because we have had input from the National Trust very concerned about funding and how well these paths are being maintained, but you have not particularly noticed that.

Paul Forecast: I am referring to the area where I live, where the investment is there. I am aware that, obviously, in terms of the sort of investment in different local authorities where they are having to make choices as to what they invest in, there has been divestment.

Martin Lane: There are two elements. Certainly, local authority investment in rights of way has been reducing with austerity measures. We have something in excess of 300 voluntary wardens who help offset some of that to a degree, but there has been a noticeable decline of investment in rights of way. If you are looking at providing a cheap and easily accessible means of enjoying the countryside and deriving health benefits, then the rights of way system is fundamental to doing that. There are issues there, and we need to reconsider the severity of those cuts and the impact they are having.

In terms of national trails, we are responsible for the Cotswold Way National Trail, together with four highway authorities, and the Cotswolds is also a starting point for the Thames Path National Trail. I have to say the funding of the trails is a subject of great concern. For the last three years, it has hiccupped along. We started the last financial year with no investment and no grant offer from Natural England. We were advised, on something like 9 June, of a 50% in-year cut. Fortunately, the Secretary of State and Minister intervened and reversed that decision, but now we are sat here towards the end of January and we have no idea what the investment will be for the next financial year.

We have certainly put forward a proposition to Defra in the past and, as has been alluded to, national parks, AONBs and national trails all came out of the same 1949 Act. National parks and AONBs are funded direct by Defra; the funding for national trails comes through Natural England. I would certainly propose that that be reviewed and Defra might consider funding national trails direct. In addition, you could quite easily link each national trail to either a national park or an AONB and you could wrap up the funding of trails with those protected landscapes. You could ring-fence it within the offer, but by doing so you would pass the money through fewer pairs of hands and you would get the investment straight to where it is needed.

Rebecca Pow: Do you think you might end up with more money?

Martin Lane: It would be lovely to invest.
Rebecca Pow: The same amount of money but better used then.

Paul Forecast: Better, more efficient, more effective, and we have been suggesting that for some time.

Q310 Rebecca Pow: What would the national park views be on that?

Sarah Fowler: On national trails, we, like AONBs, look after them as well—the Pennine Way starts in the Peak District, for example. Their whole USP is their quality, so it is about anything that gives more security of funding to them and, as Martin says, we have been through an interesting time in terms of funding over the last three years. What is most important is that continuity and, if it is transferred wherever, it is clear what is transferred and ensuring there is a national champion here for national trails as well. That is fairly important.

Q311 Rebecca Pow: Who would you like to be your national champion then—a person or a body?

Sarah Fowler: Somebody who is able to bring together all those 15 national trails and market and promote them in a positive way, and that could be a whole range of different organisations.

Q312 Rebecca Pow: We need one of those champion fell runners or something like that.

Sarah Fowler: Can I just answer in terms of rights of way, because unlike the previous question, this is one where are doing lots as a national parks authority? We do a lot of repair and maintenance. You have the British Horse Society coming on shortly and we have done some work jointly with them in the Peak District about creating new routes and new loops for joining up. There is regulation that we do, where it is needed, and we do work jointly with the county councils; your question was about county council funding. We have a very active and proactive local access forum that we secretariat for, and that brings all the user partners together, including the county councils, and talks about setting out a priority action plan for rights of way. It is very active.

County council funding is going down for this. We are finding some national parks are picking up the issues in the maintenance and we are cross-subsidising that. We are finding that some of the regulatory role of county councils is not being taken forward as much as we would like it to be taken forward. Looking after the rights of way network is crucial for national park authorities and if you look at the results of the Ramblers’ Association Big Pathwatch, it shows that in protected landscapes they are better looked after, because we recognise they are important.

Q313 Chris Davies: Panel, as you probably understand and have heard, we are going through a little process called Brexit at the moment, heading for Brexit. Naturally, things are going to change thereafter. The common agricultural policy is a very important part of funding that affects
farmers and that will affect your organisations. In your opinion, what will the Government need to retain after Brexit to ensure that farming practices protect and enhance the English natural environment on which tourism is based?

**Sarah Fowler:** There are a number of schemes: there is CAP, there is LEADER and there is RDP. There is a range of funding mechanisms, so what to retain? Whatever we have moving forward needs to be simpler, it needs to be more responsive to the needs of smaller businesses, particularly in rural tourism, and offer smaller levels of grants. There is a big challenge, we find, around matched funding and ability to support matched funding. In addition, supporting a grassroots, bottom-up approach and developing something that works in that way would be much more beneficial, because it works with the land managers and with the farmers.

**Q314 Chris Davies:** How do you think it could be made more accessible for those types of businesses?

**Sarah Fowler:** One thing that we are currently looking at across the national park authorities—and I am speaking now in my own personal remit, because we are looking at it as a piece—is how we can support farmers and land managers in replacing what CAP might be. We are really keen in national parks to act as testbeds. Agri-environment schemes started in national parks. They were tested and piloted in national parks, and we are very keen to look at that concept again. Creating a custodian scheme for farmers within national parks, a scheme that is voluntary to enter and that provides access to farmers for farm business advice, rural development advice and environmental advice, would be really valuable, having a base level of support and then a high level of support. That is something that we are really keen about and want to look at.

**Q315 Chris Davies:** Can I just come back on this for a second? There is some criticism of national parks; some people—not myself, of course—would say that they are seen as wanting to turn into a pleasure area and a fixed scene that never changes. Do you fully endorse and take on board that farming practices have to evolve, whether in a national park or not?

**Sarah Fowler:** Evolution is important and national parks being fit for the 21st century is important, so I do not subscribe to the view that we should protect these landscapes in aspic. I do subscribe to the view, though, that it is the very special qualities of these national parks—the wonder, the enjoyment, the landscapes—that bring people to enjoy it, bring people to either live in it or come and want to enjoy it and feel connected again. Whatever we do needs to maintain that value, but it is not about protecting in aspic; it is about how we move forward and evolve while looking after those special qualities.

**Martin Lane:** As said earlier, we are on the cusp of a superb opportunity to get the right scheme that we want, with the right menu. We regularly,
as a nation, criticise the bureaucracy that comes from elsewhere. Here is
our opportunity to design something that really does deliver and does not
have some of the bureaucracy, is easy to use, and sees life from the
applicant or customer perspective. We are the only protected landscape
that is an accountable body for the current LEADER programme. We
have been running that since November 2015. I have to say that that is
an applicant scheme full of bureaucracy and I would suggest that
whoever has designed it has not looked at it from the applicant’s point of
view. We need to be careful that what we put forward in future is
meeting with our aspirations and we do not repeat some of the mistakes
of the past.

That is what I was indicating earlier in terms of trying to have a
consistency of policy approach and consistency of investment approach,
be it the LEADER programme, an agri-environment programme or other
forms of the growth programme. If we are targeting finances and
targeting programmes at the rural sector, we need a local menu that
reinforces the special qualities of that landscape and of that environment,
but a local menu that is consistent across that landscape and starts out
viewing life from the applicant’s and user’s perspective.

Paul Forecast: In terms of the European Union, the first thing to say is
obviously some of the legislation that has come from the European Union
has been really instrumental in the rural tourism business. Think of the
Habitats Directive in protecting special places, the clean-beaches directive
providing clean beaches for people to visit, the Water Framework
Directive, etc. That legislation again has served it well in creating places
that people want to visit.

From our perspective, the big opportunity is around how we might use
the money that we are spending on CAP. I start from the premise that
farmers need wildlife and wildlife-rich landscapes in the same way that
wildlife needs farmers to help, so, from the National Trust’s point of view,
we would be keen to see that money is spent on providing outcomes of
public benefit from spending on the CAP. It should be mandatory that we
are doing something to protect nature. It should not be enshrined that
we should be damaging nature. We need to think about better outcomes
and, particularly, diversifying what farmers do, so again providing rural
tourism businesses through that.

Picking up on what Sarah said, it does not have to be in aspic. We could
be a very modern way of running and looking after our farm landscape in
a way that is good for wildlife, is good for food production, does preserve
some of the cultural and built heritage that is there, but it is about
investing properly.

Q316 Chris Davies: To follow up quickly, if I may, with you, Paul, and to go
slightly off-piste for a second, there was criticism at PMQs today by an
Opposition Member of such dukes as the Duke of Westminster, etc,
receiving such large payments from CAP, but the National Trust get an
exceptionally large payment from CAP. Do you think that is right? Do you think that organisations such as yours should be benefiting from European grants rather than the farmer?

**Paul Forecast:** The first thing to say is obviously the grants are paid for the outcomes that are delivered, so the National Trust does deliver those. Ultimately, we are a charity, so the money that we receive is invested into our charitable purpose, which is obviously to the benefit of the nation as well. I would hate for you to think that, in effect, there is a pocketing of money. In essence, we use that money in order to manage the land and to balance the needs of our conservation work.

**Q317 Chris Davies:** I expected you to give that answer, but do you really think that when we remodel we should be giving to organisations such as yourselves? Martin, perhaps you would like to answer.

**Martin Lane:** If the future model is one of buying public goods and services, it does not matter who you are buying them from. The National Trust is a farmer in one context and they are a manager of a historic property in another context. There are wildlife trusts; there are local charities—

**Chair:** We are slightly slipping behind time, Martin. My apologies for interrupting, but you wanted to add something.

**Martin Lane:** It was on the basis that, if we are designing a scheme for buying public goods and services, then we should not say one sector is in and another sector is out. If it is land management, then whoever is providing those public goods and services should have access to support mechanisms.

**Chair:** Thank you, and if you have anything else that you would like to add about helping small businesses access grants and farmers to diversify, do forward that to us. We would be very keen to have that.

**Q318 Ms Margaret Ritchie:** My question is about VAT on tourism, and levies. What is your assessment of the impact of a reduction in VAT on tourism and tourist accommodation?

**Paul Forecast:** One of the things that we have been asking for is whether there could be a reduction on the protection of heritage buildings. I think we would all acknowledge that many of the landscapes that we are talking about are enhanced by historic buildings that sit within them. Indeed, if you look at the survey of how we rank against other tourist destinations in the world, one of the things that we score most highly on is our historic buildings. That said, as somebody who is managing a portfolio from countryside all the way through to mansion properties, the most expensive area where we do conservation work is invariably our built heritage, so anything that can be done that allows us to get to that quicker and more easily would be really great.

We are, as a nation, sitting on some real risk. If you go around places like the Broads, the number of old watermills and stuff that are now
redundant, are stumps in the landscape and cannot be preserved, because there are not sufficient funds to do so, is a great pity and is part of the thing that people are coming to visit and see.

Q319 **Ms Margaret Ritchie:** Added to that, in particular, to the National Trust, what assessment have you made of the cost to Treasury of reducing VAT on repairs and maintenance of historic properties and the benefits to the owners of such buildings?

**Paul Forecast:** We do not have a breakdown for the entirety of historic properties. We have done an assessment of what we are paying in non-recoverable VAT, and each year that is £3 million.

Q320 **Ms Margaret Ritchie:** For Martin, what is your assessment of the impact of a reduction in VAT on tourist accommodation, and what response would you make to calls for some type of tourist tax to fund local infrastructure improvements?

**Martin Lane:** I do not have anything to add to the VAT element. In terms of a tourism tax, I alluded earlier that we are not alone, but we are one of a series of protected landscapes that has looked at a voluntary scheme, Visitor Giving. That is where the tourism business and the visitor or the guest readily see the connection between their stay, their business and the high-quality landscape, recognising that that landscape needs investment.

In terms of a tourism tax, to those of us who have travelled abroad, it does not come as a surprise that there is a tourism tax element at the end of a bill, but where does that money go? If there was an idea for a tourism tax that was related to protected landscapes or to the English rural countryside, I would be saying where does the money raised from that go? Does that go into a hole in local authority finance or does it go to a particular scheme for reinvestment back into the landscape? Not surprisingly, I would be saying we need to have a mechanism for redirecting that money straight back into the quality of the landscape.

**Sarah Fowler:** The question I always ask, a bit like yourself, is what will have the biggest impact and the biggest benefit. In terms of a tourist tax or whether that is the best approach, my view is that it is better, as Martin has said, to think about visitor payback and Visitor Giving, and opportunities for that, and then tying that into particular areas, hypothesizing it directly back into what would benefit. An example would be when we talked about rights of way and access, we talked about environmental heritage and how we can use that to maintain the countryside and keep it in good state.

We do have some schemes in infancy across some national parks. In Exmoor, we have something called Care More, there is Nurture Lakeland in the Lake District and there is Love the Forest in the New Forest. The key for this is maximum transparency, it is how this helps keep businesses operating and developing, how we continue to look after the
landscape and how we can use this to help diversify that offer in the countryside.

Q321 **Ms Margaret Ritchie:** Have you any particular view on the impact of a potential cut in VAT on tourism?

**Sarah Fowler:** I have nothing to add to what Paul has already said.

**Chair:** Margaret, thank you very much. Sarah, Martin and Paul, thank you for attending today. Thanks for being concise and for the quality of your evidence. One or two have mentioned that you might want to add; if there is anything that you do want to add or something occurs to you that you should have said, please feel free to supply some additional written submissions, it will be very welcomed by the Committee. You have been very helpful in our inquiry, so thanks again for being here today.

**Examination of witnesses**

Witnesses: Kate Conto, Roger Geffen and Mark Weston.

Q322 **Chair:** Mr Geffen, Mr Weston and Ms Conto, welcome. Thank you very much for assisting us in our inquiry. As you have seen, we are relatively informal; I hope first-name terms do not cause you any discomfort. We hope to finish by 4 pm because there is a vote coming then, so it would be tidy for us if we can get through that, but we do have a number of areas to explore with you and if we have to come back we will, but if we can get through that would be most efficient.

Can I just start the ball rolling by asking you to introduce yourselves and state the title of your organisation, and then I will ask the first question for this panel?

**Kate Conto:** I am Kate Conto. I am representing the Ramblers. We are a membership organisation with 110,000 members and 25,000 volunteers and we want everyone out enjoying the countryside on foot.

**Mark Weston:** Mark Weston. I am Director of Access at the British Horse Society. We are also a membership organisation. We are the largest equestrian charity, representing more than 94,000 members. Our principal charitable aims are education, horse welfare, equestrian safety and access to the countryside for horse riders and carriage drivers.

**Roger Geffen:** Roger Geffen, Policy Director for Cycling UK. We have recently renamed from CTC. Historically, we were the Cyclists’ Touring Club, but our name is designed to express the fact that we are lot more than being about cycle touring. We are a membership charity with 66,000 members, covering all types of non-competitive cycling, so whether for day-to-day travel or for recreation. We have a strong focus
on making cycling available to people who are not the stereotypical cyclist: people with health issues, women, people from disadvantaged backgrounds and so on. We campaign for the conditions that enable people to cycle for day-to-day travel and for recreation across all those groups, and we have local volunteers campaigning on those issues.

Q323 Chair: Super. Thank you very much. We would obviously very much welcome concise answers and we will try to be concise in our questions as well.

I will start by asking how effectively Government policies and programmes balance economic aims of promoting tourism with protecting the environment and the character of rural places, and what your organisations are doing to minimise the impact of walking, cycling and horse-riding activities on the environment and the character of rural places. What are the Government doing and what are you doing?

Kate Conto: The Ramblers is already doing quite a lot, because walking is quite a low-impact activity and we think that better public transport in rural areas is really important to minimise the impact of tourism. We have all seen cars jamming up lanes, and it does detract from the experience and enjoyment of rural areas. The Ramblers does quite a lot of footpath maintenance. We try to spread people out over the entire network and get them away from honeypot areas. In 2013, our volunteers carried out maintenance that benefitted local authorities to the tune of about £1 million, so we do quite a lot of work.

We think that one way the Government could really help balance tourism and the environment is to ensure that any new system of agricultural subsidies not only looks after the landscape but also invests in the recreational infrastructure, so that there is funding going into management of recreational infrastructure.

Q324 Chair: Do you think the Government have the balance right at the moment, or do you see CAP as an opportunity to improve?

Kate Conto: We do not really see that there is a conflict at the moment. Our colleague from the National Trust said earlier that when the Countryside and Rights of Way Act came in, there were concerns that lots more people visiting the landscape would cause damage. There has been no evidence of that, so we think that the balance is probably about right. However, we can always do with more maintenance.

Mark Weston: From an access point of view, we are working to try to increase the amount of access that is available to horse riders, especially in respect of safer off-road access. Over the last five years, 212 horses have been killed in respect of horse accidents and 38 riders have been killed. As you will probably be aware, horse riders only have access to 22% of the public rights of way network. Many riders do not have access to those off-road routes without using the road network and, often, when they do get on a bridleway or a byway or any other safe off-road access, they cannot complete their journey off-road without getting back on the
road to get back home again. We would like to see Government do more to increase the amount of safe off-road riding there.

Roger Geffen: We have a number of points that are very similar. Some of our volunteers are involved in local access forums and rights of way improvement plans. Like Kate, we are very keen to see greater public transport so that people, particularly those who do not have access to cars, are able to get out into the countryside without depending on cars. I would absolutely share what Mark just said about the need for policy in England and Wales to open up a much greater range of access for off-road cycling as well as for horse riding. Our interest in terms of rights to access are exactly aligned.

The Scottish access model would be one that we would strongly advocate in England and Wales, and it is very heartening that the Welsh Government have been considering this. That would allow both cycling and horse riding to be able to spread, and I was interested in the previous panel talking about spreading the load. That would reduce the adverse impacts that undoubtedly happen from all three user groups. Boots, hooves and tyres all have some impact, but none of them have huge and unmanageable impacts, and the tourism benefits are far greater than any cost. It is about simply getting people out in the countryside. The last area I would touch on is the projects we run to get more people out into the countryside, particularly health patients and people from other disadvantaged groups, for whom they say this provides huge physical and mental health benefits.

Q325 Dr Paul Monaghan: Good afternoon. Would you agree that criticisms of local authorities for not maintaining national trails and public rights of way are accurate? You might also want to add what your organisations are doing to support the work to keep access routes open. Maybe we could start with Mark.

Mark Weston: It is true to say that local authorities, over the last couple of years of austerity, have had to cut their budgets in a number of areas in respect of maintenance. That does cause an issue for people wanting to use their routes, because if they become so out of repair they cannot be used then, obviously, people do not have that facility to use in respect of their recreation.

In respect of what we are doing, like the Ramblers we do have volunteers who will help and go out in respective areas and cut back vegetation and make routes available. We have groups that are working with local authorities to promote routes and to encourage people to come into the areas. We are working with local authorities in respect of attracting funding as well and raising funding to improve routes and make them more useable. The Horse Society has a very small part of a community scheme whereby people can bid in respect of that money each year, which has been useful as seed funding and matched funding in respect of certain projects, to get projects off the ground. An example of that is
that in Lancashire we provided £2,000 of funding and that enabled a scheme that attracted £87,000 of funding to proceed.

**Kate Conto:** The Ramblers recently published results of a citizens’ survey. We asked our members and members of the public to go out and survey the rights of way network and record their findings on an app. We managed to survey about half the path network in England and we found that 56% of paths were well kept, 35% were adequately kept but in need of improvement and 9% were unusable because of barbed wire or undergrowth. Local authorities have had severe cuts, but it seems like either they are doing a good job of maintaining the rights of way network or those cuts have not filtered through yet on the ground. Generally, people take paths as they find them, so maintenance tends to mean nothing more than leave it unobstructed. Where there are maintenance costs, it is things like signs, gates and that sort of thing. Once that kind of infrastructure is put in, it is expected to last about 20 years, so the cost of maintenance is quite low.

We found through our survey that what really matters is the custodianship of rights of way. On National Trust land and in national parks and AONBs, the path network is better maintained, we think, because of this sense of custodianship. We think there is a role for the National Farmers’ Union and CLA to encourage this, and for any new subsidy schemes to encourage custodianship amongst landowners and farmers. It does cost them money and, quite often, it is not the landowners and farmers who benefit from having rights of way on their land; it is the pubs, the shops and B&B owners, so they need to be supported in providing that infrastructure. What the Ramblers are doing, again, as volunteers, is to work with over half the local authorities in England and repair routes.

**Roger Geffen:** I would echo what Kate said. Yes, clearly, local authorities are under financial pressure. We ran a survey recently of existing off-road cyclists and had 11,000 responses, so a very good response from the existing community. Obviously, I cannot say it is a representative response, but a response of that scale is pretty indicative of existing users, not necessarily potential users though. Maintenance did not really come up as the top-level issue.

There was much more concern about the extent of the network rather than the state of its maintenance. I would say that the other bottleneck is much more around processing of claims to extend the network. Those two are bigger bottlenecks. In other words, extending the network and indeed promoting it are bigger bottlenecks than maintaining what we have.

**Dr Paul Monaghan:** Maybe you could give us copy of the survey report.

**Roger Geffen:** I certainly can. It is written up with headline findings on the website and I will certainly send a link to you.
Q326 **David Simpson:** Do current access rules for paths and open land achieve the right balance between the interests of walkers, cyclists and horse riders? We will go to Mark, because you recommend opening up to the riders many of the paths currently restricted to use by those on foot. If it is opened up to horses and horse riders, how do you assure walkers and people who walk dogs that this will not impact on their enjoyment?

**Mark Weston:** As I said previously, we only have access to 22% of the network, so we would advocate increasing that percentage. In respect of the 22% of the network that we do have access to, obviously, walkers have access to that, dog walkers have access to that and we all get on perfectly well. Research has shown that, in effect, there is no conflict, it is more of a perceived conflict, and we do advocate responsible use of the rights of way.

In respect of surfacing, there are plenty of routes around the country that currently do not have access for horse riders where the surfacing would be perfectly good to allow cyclists and horse riders to use them.

Q327 **David Simpson:** So you would be happy to work in a partnership agreement and honour that. There would be no conflict, in your eyes, with dog walkers or cyclists or whatever.

**Mark Weston:** Indeed. We have drawn up codes of conduct in respect of cyclists, and in respect of dog walkers as well, looking at it from the eyes of the horse rider, the cyclist and the dog walker and how we can advocate best practice and to put that into practice.

Q328 **David Simpson:** To finish, Roger, briefly, from your point of view, could you explain how the Scottish access model you favour, I understand, cyclists, balances the interest of cyclists with farmers’ needs and the safety of others—walkers, for example?

**Roger Geffen:** The way the Scottish access model strikes this balance is because it shifts the emphasis from identifying where you are and where you are not allowed to go in England, encouraged to go in Scotland—and it is about encouragement—it is done on the basis of signing based on suitability, rather than on historic usage. The rights of way law in England says that cyclists and, indeed, horse riders can go on routes that have previously been claimed by historic evidence of horse use or carriage use, which does not necessarily align at all with their suitability.

One of the regular routes for my morning journey to work goes across a heath. I start off on a private road that gives access to a couple of houses on the edge of a heath. There comes a point where the bridleway forks off to the right and becomes an unrideable mud bath. The footpath continues on a tarmac-surfaced road. It is a private road, it accesses people’s homes, but I have been riding that regularly for over 10 years and I get nothing but friendly waves from anybody. Strictly speaking, I am trespassing, but nobody has ever complained.
There are many routes like that, which could be opened up. That is not every single one, and I do need to stress that what we are not calling for is a blanket right to ride on footpaths. There will be some where conflict needs to be managed because the soil is fragile, the space is too limited or whatever, but our organisations all have a common interest in not being constrained by too little width, because then we can all get along and share space and promote the common interest of increasing countryside access, which is the absolute common ground between us.

Kate Conto: We think that Scottish-style rights of access could work, but it does require careful management. In Scotland, there are some paths where you are allowed to cycle but it is recommended that you get off your bike, because perhaps it is too narrow or it is too well used or there is a dangerous corner or something like that. It is definitely possible, but it does require careful management.

Q329 Rishi Sunak: In your experience, how effectively do you think our planning policies balance the need for rural tourist businesses to expand and develop and, obviously, protection of the environment and landscape? If I could push you, do you think the balance should be tilted slightly more in favour of allowing businesses to expand and being a bit more flexible about that, particularly in national parks?

Roger Geffen: It would be helpful if low impact development that supports tourism was positively encouraged. I would not wish to criticise most national parks for being overly restrictive. I think the evidence you heard in the previous session was fair. We have had one national park in particular—I may as well name them—the New Forest National Park, which has been very problematic to deal with, not because of the National Park Authority so much, but because of the commoners’ association there. Generally, though, the national parks are very keen to support open access. Just echoing the earlier point about the national parks being very keen to be testbeds, we are having a very constructive dialogue with the Lake District National Park about a trial of more open access arrangements, along the lines of the Scottish model, on a permissive basis rather than changing the law.

In terms of planning, there are two specific points I would like to make. One is about greater protection for disused railway lines and similar linear alignments that could be opened up for recreational cycling and, indeed, for walking and horse riding. The other is perhaps not so much a planning point, but it relates to the promotion of businesses, which is allowing low-impact businesses that support tourism—so the one shop and even the bunkhouse accommodation—to have greater business relief if they stay open for 240 days a year rather than merely 140. If they go over 140 days, they lose that relief. There are things like that, which potentially go to a question that is probably coming up later around extending the season.

Mark Weston: I support what Roger has said in respect of linear routes and enabling those to be developed for safe off-road access. In respect
of horse businesses, it would obviously be useful, for land that is currently used for agriculture, if planning permission was not needed for that when it was simply a change of use to horses grazing on it and being developed for that purpose.

Kate Conto: I do not have anything to add.

Q330 Chris Davies: Panel, how do you rate VisitBritain and VisitEngland’s performance in marketing rural tourism both at home and abroad?

Roger Geffen: There is opportunity to do better, without wishing to criticise what is currently going on. Interestingly, Natural Resources Wales is doing a very good job of promoting not just the access that is there but the supporting package, and that too was touched on in the previous evidence session. How do you get there by public transport? Where do you park? Where is the accommodation? An example we have, which has been promoted locally, is the Sandstone Way in Northumbria, which has not just been opened up as a route, but with that supporting information about where is the map, both online, the GPS track, the paper maps, the accommodation, and the public transport connections, so that the whole thing is promoted as a package rather than simply promoting a route with all the signing that goes with that. If there was one thing that I would say we could do better at in England, it would be that.

Mark Weston: We would like to see VisitBritain give greater promotion of equestrianism. At present, it is mainly focused on promoting racing, but obviously the equestrian industry is a lot wider, with a lot more opportunities as to the products that could be advertised and entice people to get into the countryside. There are plenty of trekking establishments, riding-on-beaches opportunities, and riding in the national parks and the Horses Welcome facilities that exist. Signposting people towards those opportunities would be useful.

Kate Conto: We do not really have a view on VisitBritain and VisitEngland and the promotion work they do. They do promote walking on their website; you can search by walking activity, which we very much welcome. We have had discussions with them around how to encourage investment in the walking network and the recreational network, particularly around the opportunities that local enterprise partnerships present. We have also worked with organisations like the National Coastal Tourism Academy to develop Discover England Fund bids.

Q331 Chris Davies: We have heard what you think of them and your views on them, but how closely do you work with them? When you have a great idea or something coming up, what is their response, if any?

Roger Geffen: We do not have a lot of interaction with VisitEngland and VisitBritain, to be honest, and maybe you are flagging up something we need to do more of. We are about to add some strength to our off-road
and countryside access campaigning. We have more dialogue with the Forestry Commission, defence estates and the National Trust rather than VisitBritain and maybe we should reflect on that point.

**Mark Weston:** I would echo that as well. There is probably more that we could in respect of interacting with VisitBritain and pointing out the opportunities that exist for them to promote.

**Kate Conto:** Likewise.

**Chair:** Can I take it to the next level down and ask you about destination management organisations? Do you effectively engage with them and do you think that they are able to market rural areas in competition with domestic and international organisations with much greater resources? Is that another group of bodies, organisations that you engage with and do you have a view on their performance or not?

**Roger Geffen:** As I said, we do talk to particularly the Forestry Commission, the National Trust and defence estates, but it is more around access than the promotion, it must be said.

**Mark Weston:** Our experience would be the same. In respect of destination management, more could be done in terms of those destinations as regards the potential for equestrian access and what exists there.

**Kate Conto:** Same. We do not have much do have much contact with DMOs.

**Chair:** Okay. Sorry. Maybe we did not ask that question appropriately, but we are grateful for your answers.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie:** How are walkers, cyclists and horse riders helping to support rural tourist businesses to extend their offer across the year? Could you include in that what your organisations are doing to support walkers, cyclists, horse riders wishing to enjoy the countryside outside the peak summer months? Could I start with Kate, please?

**Kate Conto:** Yes. We think that walking is a year-round activity and people like to experience the countryside in all different seasons, particularly when there is a nice, warm fire and a big meal waiting for them at the end. We organise walking festivals at different times of the year, and we know different local authorities organise walking festivals. We are hoping that the England Coast Path, which will be the newest national trail and the longest continuous trail in the world when that comes on stream in 2020, will be an opportunity to bring tourists year-round to coastal locations.

**Mark Weston:** The British Horse Society has a Horses Welcome scheme, which is basically bed and breakfast for horses, and it is an approval scheme. We also produce many long-distance ride routes to encourage people to get out and do more than just a simple day ride, but to
encourage them to put together a week’s package, and those routes are available for them to use. Obviously, 96% of horse rides are leisure riders, which means that they are riding for 12 months of the year, so the more destinations that are available to them, the longer the seasons can be extended.

**Roger Geffen:** Like Kate, I would say, first, that cycling is a year-round activity, particularly the sort of cycling that people really enjoy in forests and in woodland, rather than necessarily in the unsheltered open air. The sheer popularity of cycling as an activity in Scotland testifies to that. Cycle tourism and mountain biking bring in £350 million annually to the Scottish economy, so pro rata factor that up for England and you can see the scale of that.

I would hark back to my earlier point about the availability of accommodation out of season. Many of the businesses that support rural tourism close for the winter, and that limits the ability of cyclists to access that opportunity that is still there year-round. Supporting those rural businesses to stay open year-round would make it easier to promote them for year-round cycling. We had an off-road themed issue of our membership magazine only this month and that reflects the fact that it is still an activity that is going on at this time of year.

**Chair:** Thanks, Roger. Paul’s radar naturally twitched when you mentioned Scotland and the Scottish experience, but it is Chris who wants to ask a follow-up question to what you just mentioned.

**Chris Davies:** We have spent this inquiry looking at the benefits to tourism, but you are three organisations bringing people into the countryside and, therefore, you are going to come into conflict, on occasions, with the agriculture and the farming community. How do balance what you do against the needs of the people who live in the countryside all year round?

**Roger Geffen:** I wish I had brought with me a quote that we had from Dr Richard Wakeford, former chief executive of the Countryside Agency, as it then was, and then later head of environment for the Scottish Government at the time that the access legislation was coming through. He said that the perceived problems just turned out to not be real problems. There is very good research evidence that erosion management and all the rest of is just not a problem. Clearly, the problem is irresponsible behaviour, not cycling or horse riding or walking per se. There will be irresponsible individuals in any group of humans that you care to find, whether it be walking, cycling, public transport, football supporters; you name it, there will be people who behave irresponsibly and we are in the business of promoting—

**Chris Davies:** Even politicians.

**Roger Geffen:** I could not possibly comment. The point is we are all in the business of promoting responsible access to the countryside and that is exactly what the Scottish model proposes. It is not a blanket right to
go everywhere; it is a right to go anywhere so long as you are acting responsibly, and that is exactly what we support.

**Mark Weston:** On the horse front, I would say that horse riders contribute £4.3 billion to the national economy and much of that will go straight back to the farmers and the landowners in respect of giving us places to keep the horses, providing us with fencing, forage, etc. A large portion of that goes back to the farmers and, as Roger has said, it is all about promoting responsible horse riding and responsible access to the countryside, which we do.

**Kate Conto:** I agree completely with Roger and Mark. What I would add is that a lot of fears were raised at the time when the Countryside and Rights of Way Act went through, which gave people a right to walk across open countryside, and there just has not been the evidence that those problems have come up.

**Q335 Chris Davies:** Forgive me; your organisation has probably been in the press a little bit more than the other two and criticism has been targeted towards your organisation. Would I be correct in assuming that?

**Kate Conto:** I am not aware of the criticism you mean. Is there a particular incident?

**Chris Davies:** With ramblers’ right to roam, etc.

**Kate Conto:** There were fears before the Act went through that there would be chaos in the countryside and there would be littering, crime and those sorts of things, and there just is not the evidence that that has happened. It goes to show that a conflict between the two interests is probably overblown, because it just has not really come to fruition.

**Chair:** Kate, Mark and Roger, thank you very much for being here and for the conciseness of your answers. My apologies for the questions on VisitBritain, VisitEngland and DMOs, which obviously were not really within your scope. If there was anything that you thought you might be asked and it has not been asked or, as I said to the previous panel, if there is anything that you want to add to contribute to our consideration, we would very much welcome anything in writing that you want to add.

In conclusion, let me say thank you very much for being here today and for the evidence you have given; it will be of assistance to us in helping us conclude our inquiry, so thank you very much.