There is no question that England is a green and pleasant land and that most people value their opportunities to enjoy the countryside. For inhabitants of our urban conurbations the benefits of such open space for both general health and wellbeing and mental health are undoubted. People go there to wind down and get away from the noise, stress and bustle of everyday life.

The countryside is attractive in its own right but is invaluable as a source of food; the vegetation helps cleanse the air and provides habitat for birds and other creatures which people like to see. The typical small hamlet, possibly still with a rural pub on the village green provides the apparently idyllic lifestyle which people wish to enjoy, if only fleetingly.

So why do more people not take advantage of these opportunities? Tourism provides billions of pounds each year to rural economy but could contribute far more. There are three strands to such activity. There are those going out for the day to accessible countryside and village, those who take or could take holidays in rural locations and overseas visitors.

There are barriers to all such visitors which need to be addressed if we are to boost this revenue. Some are common to all users such as poor transport connections, inadequate signage and information and lack of amenities. For a rural community to be able to provide facilities like cafes and pubs, they have to be viable communities in their own right. Pubs in particular need bread and butter local trade to survive and take advantage of any passing custom. Communities need affordable housing to keep the younger population in the villages as these are the people who would probably staff catering facilities. They also need employment and business opportunities if they are to remain sustainable communities and this is greatly hindered by restricted or at best poor broadband access.

Tourism in rural areas does create job opportunities but it is often seasonal and locals cannot live off occasional work alone so we do need to see how tourism could be promoted for larger parts of the year. We need to encourage more people, both from Britain and overseas, to visit more of England’s rural areas, for longer and at more times of the year.

It is a bit chicken-and-egg though. People do not have a good experience if there are no facilities but if we are to encourage farmers and rural residents to diversify into tourism, they may well need some start-up support. They cannot make it pay until visitors come and visitors will not go if there are no facilities there.

**Marketing:** Most countries of the world are comparatively young and a major attraction of Britain is its history; its magnificent old buildings and stately homes and country estates. Visitors often head for London, Stratford on Avon, Chester and York etc., and if travelling by car dash past lovely villages with cottages every bit as old and interesting. Foreigners have mostly seen country cottages on their biscuit tins and have heard people wax lyrical about our country pubs but they do not know how to find them. They just end up going to the honey pots. We need to include in our marketing the wonderful spring wildflowers.
to be found in many areas, the blossom seasons in fruit growing areas and the glowing colours of autumn woodlands. We could also publish suggested tours by car targeted at particular interest groups. Ideally we should promote means of accessing these areas without the need of a car.

People with interest in the countryside coming from abroad tend to head for our National Parks which already come under serious pressure at peak times. We need to promote our other areas of outstanding beauty

**Access:** To our mind this is the biggest problem, and many changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside. Once the English Coast Path and Spreading Room is completed this could be marketed internationally as it will be a fairly unique opportunity. The success of the Wales coast path shows what impact it could have and businesses along National Trails such as the Coast to Coast and Pennine Way show the benefits of these walking routes. Long distance bridleways and a more coherent bridleway network could have a similar effect. There will never be as many riders as walkers but provision for horse riders can encourage the support businesses, livery stables etc., and that itself can boost local economies.

Lack of funds for maintenance causes rights of way to become overgrown, gates to become defective and obstructions not to be removed. For example there was a small but thriving horse tourism business organised by Bridlerides in East Leicestershire and Rutland where visitors came here with their horses and rode circular and linear routes over three to five days. They stayed each night at designated bed and breakfasts for horse and rider, ate supper in the local pub, supported a service to move their luggage each day and bought lunch either in village shops or pubs. This supported the more rural areas of East Leicestershire with low impact on the environment.

This has sadly all but ground to a halt; mostly because the Bridlerides business was sold on and the new organisers lacked the skill and enthusiasm of the founder, but the lack of path maintenance and bad gates in a county with many gates was given as a reason for less equestrian tourists being attracted. Another good example is Gloucestershire which has a thriving equestrian tourism industry and they have similar number of gates to Leicestershire which can be opened from horseback and are well maintained.

An example of poor maintenance and the adverse outcome can be seen in the Midshires Way linking the Ridgeway to the Pennine Bridleway. Whilst in existence for nearly 25 years now some sections are difficult to ride because the farmers have not installed rider-friendly gates for ensuring that such as are there have not 'dropped' and that the catches can be operated from horseback. The end result is a lost opportunity to make this a catalyst for service businesses along the route.

Bicycle riders can also enjoy bridleways and could use them in conjunction with the Sustrans routes offering endless cycling holiday options. Long distance trails, cycleways and bridleways and circular routes can really boost local economies but they do need to be maintained and marketed. These routes should where ever possible be separated from motorised travel if they are to be both safe and enjoyable.
For those however who are not into long distance trekking and just want family walks or sightseeing excursions there are two major barriers, one actual and one part psychological. Car parking at many rural locations is not always readily available and in any event we would wish to encourage the use of public transport. Unfortunately it is virtually non-existent.

The other barrier is fear. Fear of the unknown can be being completely unfamiliar with and uncomfortable with the presence of farm animals beside footpaths. Fear can be as simple as wanting to go for a walk but not knowing where a path goes, how far it is and how to get back. Even in our better signed counties we usually only have a finger post saying footpath. In many countries it would say footpath to where, how far, or even how long it will take and the degree of physical challenge. Many alpine villages even have a notice board in the centre of the village with a map showing all suggested walks by grade.

There are successful local bus schemes around the country providing access to rural villages but they are few and far between and often run by local cooperatives of businesses and user groups. All suitably attractive rural areas could have an hourly hop on hop off circular services with one standard fare. We are aware of ones with a £1 fare and others where a small fare gets you a day ticket. Such an arrangement would have to start off at weekends but based on take up could be extended.

**Funding and fiscal policies:** In these financially constrained times it is hard to see public funding of sufficient magnitude being available to make any real difference. What is available has to be best targeted to get new rural tourist businesses off the ground and keep them going. There could perhaps be a five year tax honeymoon on start ups in designated rural areas size-limited communities or until turnover reaches a certain level. We think that other than this funding would be best directed at subsidising local bus operators plying between and around such areas. If we can encourage and facilitate people to visit then business opportunities will follow. Once we are free of EU regulations the moneys provided to support farming could be directed at the provision of services to visitors.

**Planning and regulation:** We feel that National Parks work fine at present and see no need for change. To encourage sustainable tourism in other rural areas however, planning rules about alternate or additional businesses uses of premises could be relaxed provided structural changes would not have a negative effect of the ambiance and street scene of the areas trying to attract visitors. We do feel people in rural areas should be enabled to work from home whenever possible to reduce road traffic and the associated pollution. We must also ensure that not only is an attractive landscape maintained but that there is adequate access to actually enjoy our countryside.

The planning system can play a major part in this by ensuring our rights of way network is protected and actually enhanced where possible. The trade off for grant support and planning permission can sometimes be the provision of a link in a route. It can also help by ensuring affordable housing both to buy and let is available within small communities.
The National Planning Policy Framework does set out in broad terms how planning can be used as a tool to support rural economies. It allows for the use of new and existing buildings but we feel there could be more emphasis on the imaginative use of existing and often semi derelict properties. We need to increase housing availability in villages whilst protecting the Green Belt and Green Wedges but should also ensure separation zones so that communities can remain distinct identities.

We feel agricultural buildings could convert to residential buildings but with some form of covenant that they must be the primary residence of the occupants and at least one occupant should be in full time employment in the vicinity or have retired from full time employment nearby.

Small scale wind turbines and solar panels on buildings help the economy and the environment but planners should ensure that larger scale schemes do not disfigure the landscape to the extent that visitors stop contributing to the local economy.

**Infrastructure and skills:** We are unsure as to how we could ensure there are enough people with the right skills until we see what sorts of opportunities are created. Infrastructure however is an essential area where improvement is urgently needed. Transport links to major transport hubs is minimal, broadband is inadequate and social cohesion is missing. Many areas have churches with only occasional services, no village store, no post office, no pub, no library and few primary schools. If communities are to survive they need a focal point and more could be done to encourage multi use of buildings. Sales of alcohol from churches may be unacceptable but many of these buildings could provide a number of these services and bring communities together.

**Local environment and character:** In most areas we see no need to try and enhance the local environment and character. We feel what is there is usually fine but it needs protecting and we need to facilitate more people being able to access and enjoy it.

**DeFRA role:** As much as anything we see a need to bring together all government departments having any possible impact in this area to ensure a holistic approach.

**Summary:** We must not overlook the considerable leisure tourism from our own urban areas to rural areas. The more this is encouraged the more rural businesses providing for their needs, can grow and diversify, sustaining local communities. This then leads to employment for local people, helping them to stay in their communities if housing is available. This in turn gives more sustaining local services, such as public transport, churches, schools, pubs and shops/post offices.

Land managers need encouragement and support in maintaining the landscape to draw people into rural areas. They can provide services to support the tourist industry including accommodation tea rooms and farm shops.

Much of this internal tourism is day-tripping but as facilities and services become available more people might have extended visits and what is good for our own populations must also enhance the offering to visitors from overseas.