Introduction:

Kirkby Stephen & District Walkers are Welcome are a voluntary organisation who have held accreditation from Walkers are Welcome CIC since 2009. This requires meeting the Walkers are Welcome criteria for a town that welcomes walkers. We promote walking and general tourism for the wider Upper Eden of 17 parishes and parish meetings ensuring good facilities for walkers. We work with Kirkby Stephen Town Council, businesses, Upper Eden Visitor Centre and local organisations including the North Pennines AONB and Cumbria Wildlife Trust.

This is the most sparsely populated area of England. The median household income in Eden is £25,458 with more than 3,299 households receiving an annual income of less than £10,000.1 Overall Indices of Multiple Deprivation decile for Upper Eden range from 4-6. Kirkby Stephen together with some nearby parishes rate as within the 10% most deprived areas of England in relation to Barriers to Housing & Services and to the Living Environment.2 Whilst we need higher paid and full-time employment, tourism has become vital to the economy.

Part of our area joined the northern extension of the Yorkshire Dales National Park on 1st August and we are optimistic of some economic benefits particularly through wider publicity as the ‘Northern Gateway to the Yorkshire Dales National Park’ and the ‘Westmorland Dales’.

Kirkby Stephen is a small rural market town with 1,800 population and a wider hinterland of 5,000 attracting mainly walking tourism along the ten long distance trails including the Wainwright Coast to Coast, Pennine Journey and Lady Anne’s Way that pass through our town. We attract visitors from the Netherlands, USA, Canada and Australia who come to experience our countryside, the long distance walking challenge and having heard of a particular trail.

Executive Summary:

- We have very little help from recognised agencies but through volunteers and other organisations manage limited promotion of our area.

- National promotion of the benefits of out of season visits to the countryside is needed to better sustain businesses and employment.

- An association for independent Tourist Information Centres and Visitor Centres is needed.

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1 Cumbria County Council Eden Local Plan 2014-17
2 http://www.cumbriaobservatory.org.uk/antipoverty/ID.asp
We generally protect ourselves from the excesses of tourism through alternative planning policy and because of our Conservation Area.

Public transport is a big problem.

Remove VAT from tourism businesses, particularly accommodation.

Grant funding required for new investment.

Alternative funding essential for maintenance of Public Rights of Way.

1. Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should the Government do to support this work?

Cumbria Tourism, formerly Cumbria Tourist Board, is the official Destination Management Organisation for Cumbria or more accurately, the very successful marketing organisation for the honey-pot Lake District. Large reductions in rural development funding a few years ago led to Cumbria Tourism consolidating into a membership only organisation to remain sustainable. This has made a “chicken and egg” situation as they have more members in the more expensive well-visited areas and these parts are therefore better promoted and more successful.

The relationship therefore to poorer neighbours, such as ourselves in the Upper Eden, has changed and most of our small lower end businesses cannot afford membership or the branded Go Lakes advertising and services. They do not see, quite rightly, that Cumbria Tourism is promoting our area. Additionally, we do not wish our visitors to believe that they are booking the Lake District and be disappointed.

2015 Eden tourism figures\(^3\) this includes Kirkby Stephen and the Upper Eden

- Eden attracted 4.64 million tourism visits (visitor numbers up 3.6% on 2014)
- A massive £300 million being generated within the local economy through visitor and tourism business expenditure
- An economic impact of + 8.6% between 2014 and 2015
- Tourism accounted for more than 4,200 full-time equivalent jobs in Eden

Despite not having a statutory duty Eden District Council still have a limited tourism team promoted as VisitEden but again they chose to promote the honey-pot Ullswater and larger Penrith town with promotion policies generally catering for a few larger businesses. Advertising on their website and brochure produces an income. The staff are generally unfamiliar with our area and do not appear to appreciate our offer or potential.

Some four years ago, Eden District Council planned to close the Kirkby Stephen Tourist Information Centre and it is now run by the community, Upper Eden CIC, as the Upper Eden Visitor Centre reliant on volunteers and a small donation to cover the rent. Retail generally covers other

\(^3\) According to the 2015 STEAM research figures for the Eden District
running costs but there is no funding for marketing. When this was a Tourist Information Centre it was part of a larger family but with so many centres closing and changing out of necessity there is no longer this network of support. Introduction of an independent nationwide organisation would be beneficial.

*VisitEngland* do not generally promote small countryside areas. A quick look at our area on their website will find numerous destinations in the Lake District plus Penrith, Ullswater and Maryport for the North West. The closest to us mentioned is probably under the Yorkshire Dales National Park with a Hawes entry which is 15 miles away. What a difference national promotion of walking in the winter, children enjoying the rain, winter and Christmas festivals and markets might make to winter trade in the countryside. Extending the season is paramount to making sustainable businesses offering permanent jobs.

Television programmes such as Julia Bradbury walking the Wainwright Coast to Coast, Countryfile, Lambing Live, Secret/Hidden Places have all helped to promote our area highlighting our assets but these have to be regular to sustain interest and preferably viewed overseas. We also attract articles in the national press occasionally which helps to raise awareness. Holiday cottage companies are quite good at promoting their properties as are companies specialising in walking holidays. We do however, struggle with an identity since the boundary changes and removal of Westmorland in 1974. We are arranging to promote ourselves as the Westmorland Dales within the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

We market ourselves through volunteer efforts with generally no budget and grants to enable us to invest in our own product would be brilliant. Larger towns are often able to tap into businesses for sponsorship but certainly not when they are starting out.

Destination and brown signs from major roads and motorways are very difficult to have authorised by Highways England. With our new role as ‘Northern Gateway to the Yorkshire Dales’ or ‘Westmorland Dales’ it would be so good to be signposted from the M6. Scotland appears to take signposting their national parks and attractions more seriously.

2. **Access: What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?**

We are just 10 miles from the M6 and have a reasonable main road network although the A66 desperately needs upgrading. Increased housing without investment in highways and additional car ownership has led to congested local roads with almost no two-way traffic. Planning policies that also cater for new road networks are paramount going forward rather than all vehicles merging onto existing Victorian roads.

Kirkby Stephen has a station on the Settle-Carlisle railway with a limited service and connections at Leeds for London via the East Coast Mainline. Whilst a delightful journey, this cannot be compared to the main lines for speed, efficiency, comfort and frequency. Recently there has been a 75% loss of passengers on the Settle-Carlisle line because of work outstanding from a landslide section near Armathwaite originating from the winter flooding which will not be repaired until next year. There is a new franchise agreement on the Settle-Carlisle with Arriva and some improvements have been promised by 2020 but this in no way covers what is needed.
There are no regular bus services to either our own station, 1.5 miles out of town uphill, or the West Coast Mainline at Oxenholme, 25 miles away. This means that people are less likely to visit by public transport for day trips or weekends and overseas visitors less likely to make the more difficult journey. Without public transport, increased tourism means increased congestion and a poorer quality experience.

We have seen our bus services cut drastically as Cumbria County Council have cut all bus subsidies in an attempt to balance their budgets due to government cuts. Bus subsidies are not a statutory duty. Even funding the difference in the elderly bus pass as opposed to the amount given by the government is very costly. Bus services are really essential for walking tourism and part of the Walkers are Welcome criteria that our accreditation addresses.

3. Funding and fiscal policies: How can public funding be best targeted to get new rural tourist businesses off the ground and keep them going? Are changes needed to tax levels and business rates?

Small business rate relief for Business Rates currently in force in our area have been very beneficial and it means that many small businesses are not currently paying rates. However, rate relief for empty commercial premises does not encourage occupation. Proposed changes keeping Business Rates local might help in the long term but only if this money goes back to the smallest authority as in town or parish council and not to district or county councils who have alternative priorities.

Planning, Commercial Rates and Council Tax needs to incentivise full occupancy of housing property. Not housing built for use as holiday homes only sitting empty. Not discounts for second homes, uninhabited or vacant dwellings. Not Business Rates that allow for part-time occupation without cost or reduced cost. Property that is empty for much of the year and is not available for local occupation does not benefit any community.

There should be no VAT on tourism related businesses, this contributes to making Britain less competitive than other countries.

We need an all-weather family friendly attraction from which new tourism can grow but because of the high costs and low initial payback this should be grant funding. Various local plans have been thwarted because of not being able to raise the funding at the final hurdle.

4. Local environment and character: How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

We are fortunate in having a Conservation Area and whilst planning policy has been perhaps a little too relaxed as regards replacement doors and windows or enforcement, this does enable us to prevent inappropriate building from spoiling the historical character.

We have a Neighbourhood Development Plan and Kirkby Stephen Town Plan which address some of these issues, e.g. allowing barn conversions (now government policy) and refusing building above the town on surrounding hills to spoil the landscape. Future development sites have been
identified that preserve the heritage and landscape qualities that maintain this attractive area for residents and visitors. This has however, often been a fight with the district planning authority in their quest to meet housing targets with possibly inappropriate developments rewarded with the New Homes Bonus.

Relaxing planning for caravan and camping sites, log cabins etc. on green field sites perhaps hidden from view, would be helpful. These are of a more temporary nature and allow increased tourism without encroaching on local needs and the environment.

5. **Infrastructure and skills:** What measures are needed to ensure transport, housing and other infrastructure meets visitor needs? How can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?

Those companies that pay good wages, offer good conditions, advancement and training will always have no problem in recruiting and retaining staff. Happy professional staff always benefit a business and are worth the investment. They will also be able to generally afford local housing where available. The trend of importing staff from the EU on the lowest possible pay less reductions for accommodation and/or “0” hours contracts rather than investing in staff generally creates problems and often leads to local unemployment. Apprenticeships that are just an excuse for reduced wages like apprentice chambermaids should be stopped. Where large employers have a gap for seasonal staff why aren’t these jobs advertised nationwide in job centres for our own young people requiring experience or holiday jobs whilst in training rather than higher youth unemployment figures?

We have dealt with housing and transport elsewhere.

6. **Local environment and character:** How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

See item 4.

7. **Defra role:** What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do to ensure government departments (including Departments for Communities and Local Government, Business, Innovation and Skills, Culture Media and Sport and HM Treasury) support rural tourism?

We are particularly concerned about the maintenance and improvement of Public Rights of Way. Funding cuts to Cumbria County Council have inevitably led to cuts in spending on PROW’s and their Countryside Access Department staff. We can give evidence that statutory duties are not being met which appears to be a similar picture throughout the country be this because of Highways Authority spending or landowner management. We have worked with the county in obtaining external funding for particular improvements but this is not a long term solution.

If farmers and landowners could be compensated for ROW improvements much like the environment stewardship schemes there would be not only increased maintenance but also a different attitude and care of these assets by landowners.
In any event there needs to be a fresh look at how Rights of Way maintenance and improvements are managed and financed going forward. Our PROW network is the envy of the world and essential for all walking tourism.

Above all, government should consider the implications of national policy, often written to solve problems in the south of England, has on small rural towns, villages and the countryside. This rural proofing is often ignored. Government policy should also be considered across all departments and not in isolation.

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