Summary

- National Parks in England are major contributors to the tourism economy currently accounting for more than £4bn of visitor spending (a quarter of spending on rural tourism). National Parks have a key role to play in promotion of our national visitor offer as they are an internationally recognised brand and provide high quality visitor experiences in iconic landscapes. These internationally recognised landscapes attract over 90 million visitors a year. Much more could be done by our national, regional and local tourism agencies to promote our best landscapes and support the rural economies and communities based in them.

- While improving access for all to the coast and countryside is welcome we are concerned that maintenance of our existing access infrastructure and funding for sustainable travel methods is being overlooked and underfunded to the detriment of both residents and visitors.

- Existing national grants systems are overcomplicated and inaccessible for start-ups and small businesses. Public funding could be better targeted to ensure the right business support systems are in place.

- Planning and regulation play a vital role in maintaining a high quality tourism offer. National Park Authorities take a proactive, positive approach to planning in order to protect and enhance these special places for the benefit of visitors, residents and businesses. Rather than further changes, there is clear evidence that the planning system, and rural areas in particular, need a period of stability.

- More needs to be done to raise the profile and status of tourism as a positive career choice. Training should be tailored to local needs and to provide a career structure.

- Maintaining the “Sense of Place” and “Local Distinctiveness” of our rural areas is critical to sustaining rural tourism. National Parks are exemplars in demonstrating an integrated and sensitive approach to development that benefits local communities and sustainable tourism.

- Greater recognition by all Government Departments, local authorities and agencies of the importance of tourism, particularly sustainable tourism, to rural economies would assist in the promotion and development of an improved visitor offer across the UK.

1. National Parks England (NPE) supports the policy-making process by co-ordinating the views of the nine English National Park Authorities (NPAs) and the Broads Authority. It is governed by the Chairs of the ten authorities. We welcome the opportunity to
contribute to this inquiry. Our response represents the collective view of officers who are working within the policies established by the NPAs and Broads Authority and follows internal consultation amongst the officers.

Marketing of rural destinations

2. As an internationally recognised brand National Parks have a key part to play in attracting visitors to the UK and providing a high quality visitor experience. National Park Authorities (through National Parks England and National Parks UK) work with VisitEngland and VisitBritain to promote National Parks as part of the UK visitor offer but much more could be done to promote our best landscapes and so support the rural economies and communities based in them.

3. The stated aim of Government policy\(^1\) is to encourage visitors to explore the UK outside London and other cities. However, our national tourism bodies still do not fully exploit the “UK National Parks” brand, especially to inbound visitors from the US and other countries where National Parks are more visible and acknowledged as destinations offering unique nature-based experiences. National Parks have been part of the ‘Countryside is GREAT’ campaign led by VisitBritain and we welcome the work done through this campaign. However, despite the excellent ‘Countryside is GREAT’ and #OMGB campaigns, the focus of in-bound marketing by VisitBritain is still predominantly urban, focusing too much on cities (London, York, Edinburgh) and large rural attractions and not the beautiful countryside in between and the wonderful experiences people can have there.

4. We feel that the next phase of this marketing should be directly linked to all of the UK’s National Parks, which are a known international brand, and not implied through generic words such as ‘countryside’. A focus on our best landscapes could also include Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) such as Cornwall, the Cotswolds and the North Pennines which also offer visitors great experiences. National Park experts are happy to work more closely with VisitBritain to help with this.

5. At the local level, marketing of National Parks to out-of-region visitors by Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) happens but not as a matter of course. There is less promotion for individual attractions and accommodation business if they opt not to be DMO members. As a result of the changes to central funding, DMOs now rely on membership subscriptions and so rather than promote all attractions and businesses in an area they are (or feel that they are) obliged only to promote their paying members. Small businesses under financial pressure may not feel able to pay the membership fee. Also, changes in marketing for all businesses, brought about by the digital age may have resulted in a decline in DMO membership, since many are now able to manage their own booking and marketing using online agencies and social media.

\(^1\) Backing the Tourism Sector A Five Point Plan, Department for Culture, Media & Sport
Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street and Department for Transport, July 2015
6. This issue is more of a problem in rural areas which are characterised by smaller businesses. Each village or district is trying to market their visitor offer while DMOs tend to operate at the county level only and so are failing to support small business and individual rural communities adequately. For example, Exmoor is a strong brand in its own right but is a much smaller area with a smaller business base to draw funds from than many county DMOs including those who overlap the area such as Devon and Somerset. There is a vicious circle in operation in tourism promotion – small businesses won’t join together to collectively market themselves without evidence of effective campaigns which can’t be funded until more businesses join. This is exacerbated by the fact that many businesses now get a high proportion of bookings through online agencies rather than local tourism sites. Small businesses won’t pay towards local tourism sites and campaigns if they cannot to see a direct correlation between these and bookings. However, a site like booking.com doesn’t inspire people to visit different areas but is great if you know where you want to stay. So, there is a need for marketing of rural areas (both on and offline) to inspire visits, even if people then book via other routes. The former funding model where there was a central fund available for marketing an area and all businesses could join at varying levels, including for free, went a long way to overcoming this problem.

7. Government could use future funding to provide smaller grants for partnership projects in rural areas, enabling free membership for small businesses and providing seed funding for local partnerships that the businesses themselves cannot afford. The huge demand for the £250k grants available in Stage 1 of the Discover England Fund has proven the need for smaller amounts of money to kick start initiatives.

Access to coast and countryside

8. Providing access to our National Parks is part of our core purposes and we are concerned that the need for maintenance of our existing access infrastructure and sustainable travel methods is being overlooked and underfunded to the detriment of both National Park residents and visitors.

9. Funding available for “improving access” tends to focus on new or innovative approaches and major projects; when what we actually need is adequate, ring-fenced funding to secure the well-used and successful public rights of way network (PROW) which underpins all our outdoor recreation and is one of the best in Europe. This would include funding for nationally significant access routes such as National Trails (the Pennine Way for example) and other long distance routes allowing National Parks and other rural areas to maintain and enhance their offer to visitors. With secure core funding for the maintenance of the existing network in place, work to enhance access and improve the network would then build on a solid foundation.

10. With a continued reduction in rural bus services and limited alternatives, access to the coast and countryside is reliant on car trips which is an issue for lower income groups with low levels of car ownership. Investment in leisure public transport would provide an alternative (though this would seem unlikely as subsidised public transport to the countryside is very low down most local authority’s priorities). Local Authority transport
departments tend not to fully appreciate the value of visitor spend to local communities and faced with difficult decisions they prioritise local services over leisure services citing impact on local residents but do not factor in the effect that loss of tourism revenue might have on local communities.

11. Better maintenance and promotion of existing walking and cycling connectivity between urban and rural areas and well as the creation of more shared use/off road paths would encourage more people to visit the coast and countryside and to leave their cars behind. This would have a positive effect on the visitor economy, on people’s health and reduce congestion and traffic impacts in rural areas.

Funding and fiscal policies for rural businesses

12. Existing grant systems are overcomplicated and inaccessible for start-ups and small businesses. Funding should be targeted to ensure the right business support systems are in place, including business advice, skills and training opportunities, and that infrastructure such as mobile and broadband connectivity meets the needs of rural businesses and communities.

13. With most of the funding currently available, too much reliance is placed upon the private sector providing 50% match funding to draw down grants. As most rural tourism business are micro-businesses\(^2\), with very little capital, compared to the large hotel chains or tourism attractions, the financial risks are too high for them to take. Those rural destinations that are fortunate enough to have some ‘big players’ are always going to be at an advantage over those without.

14. Also, funding agencies are too cautious in supporting initiatives when they are dealing with a plethora of micro-businesses dispersed over a wide rural area. National Park Authorities can and have played a part as a broker and coordinator for such initiatives but areas without such opportunities are at even greater disadvantage.

15. LEADER is a good source of funding for rural businesses and communities in rural areas but some small organisations find the application process daunting. Future rural development funding streams need to be accessible to small organisations and support revenue costs as well as capital (even if only in pursuit of establishing a capital project).

Planning and regulation

16. Planning and regulation play a vital role in maintaining a high quality tourism offer. This is particularly so in the context of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and their special qualities. The planning system provides a key tool for protecting and enhancing the special qualities of these areas, for enabling sustainable development and tourism and so ensuring businesses which thrive in the National Parks respect and value the environment in which they operate and trade: that inappropriate

\(^2\) Over 90% of businesses in National Parks employ fewer than 10 people – Valuing England’s National Parks, NPE, 2013 [http://www.nationalparksengland.org.uk/?a=338361](http://www.nationalparksengland.org.uk/?a=338361)
or unconstrained development does not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. Unconstrained development or greater relaxation of planning control risks eroding the special qualities which attract visitors to our National Parks in the first place.

17. The National Planning Policy Framework already looks to support a prosperous rural economy and requires that planning policies support economic growth in rural areas including by supporting sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments that benefit businesses in rural areas, communities and visitors, and which respect the character of the countryside. The Committee asks if any changes to planning and regulation are required to encourage sustainable tourism. We would argue that rather than further changes, there is clear evidence that the planning system, and rural areas in particular, need a period of stability. Our evidence to the Rural Planning Review in April 2016 sets out our case in more detail.

18. National Park Authorities take a proactive and positive approach to planning in order to protect and enhance these special places for the benefit of visitors, residents and businesses. This includes supporting the provision and expansion of tourist and visitor facilities in appropriate locations where identified needs are not met by existing rural services and support for rural businesses through skills training, grants, business support and other initiatives.

19. Robust rural proofing of national and local planning policy is required to avoid unintended consequences and negative impacts upon sustainable development in our protected landscapes. For example, the planning system plays an important role in sustaining viable farm holdings by protecting them from the promise of residential uses or conversions which may have greater value than their current use. A greater flexibility around residential conversion risks skewing land values in favour of conversion to residential use for short term gain, prejudicing the ability for the farm unit to operate sustainably into the future and thus undermining the viability of critical land management practice and doing nothing to address issues around affordable rural housing.

Infrastructure and skills

20. Having a career in tourism, especially rural tourism is still too often regarded as a “low status” option for young people. This perception is damaging to the industry as a whole, and more needs to be done to raise the profile and status of rural tourism as a positive career choice.

21. Provision of training for young people should be tailored to local needs and to provide a career structure from school, colleges and apprenticeships, so that there is an option for training which matches local employment requirements. There are initiatives across the country addressing these issues. For example, Northumberland NPA are currently

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working closely with Northumberland College, who are developing their new rural tourism academy at Kirkley Hall, with NPA staff participating in the delivery of rural tourism modules and placements. Apprenticeships need to work for the sector. For example, many tourism businesses won’t take on an apprentice for a 12 month period as they only have volume of business to accommodate them for 6 months but an apprenticeship could be combined with college study or other training and/or alternative work placements during low season to provide an attractive and effective opportunity. This approach has already been successfully adopted in the North York Moors National Park.

22. It is also important that young people have transport to get to work in rural areas. Lack of public transport can be a barrier to take up of apprenticeships, training or employment.

23. Mobile coverage and broadband are now essential to many visitors and for businesses to operate successfully but rollout in rural areas is still a problem. NPAs are working on innovative solutions such as the ‘Connecting Dartmoor and Exmoor’ partnership with Airband which will deliver a dedicated programme of superfast broadband coverage across Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks, connecting some 5,800 homes and businesses and bringing superfast coverage up to an estimated 96% of premises by the end of 2017.

Local environment and character

24. Maintaining the “Sense of Place” and “Local Distinctiveness” of our rural areas is critical to sustaining rural tourism. Transport planning and road engineering can often be inappropriate and damaging to the rural character of an area (including the level of street lighting). National Parks can be exemplars in demonstrating a more integrated and sensitive approach in this area of development.

25. NPAs celebrate the special qualities of an area which are an integral to the tourism offer such as, wildlife, cultural heritage, spectacular landscapes and dark skies. We reflect these in our policies and through neighbourhood planning. This takes into consideration the concerns of local people and builds a framework for managing growth in National Parks. We would advocate this approach in other areas.

Defra’s role in supporting rural tourism

26. Tourism is a cross-cutting issue so a joined up approach across all Government Departments is needed. A shared recognition of the value of tourism to the economy would be welcome. A shared strategy between all the departments involved in the delivery of the national tourism offer would benefit the tourism industry, visitors and residents. The 8 Point Plan for National Parks (2016-2020) provides a starting point for meaningful cross departmental conversations and actions on tourism and other topics.

5 http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/aboutus/connecting-dartmoor/connecting-dartmoor-and-exmoor
27. Defra’s role should include continuing to champion Britain’s food offer as a significant visitor attraction. The UK is not known for its good food but this is changing. Research from the South Downs National Park found that 60% of visitors stated that food is the secondary reason for them visiting the National Park (usually after Landscape as the primary reason). Of the Protected Foods specific to England, over one third are produced within the English National Parks and the 16 vineyards in the South Downs National Park are part of our thriving white and sparkling wine sector attracting visitors and business to the UK.

28. Defra should champion the National Parks as a vital part of our national tourism offer and make sure that government policies for tourism recognise National Parks’ special qualities and as flagships for sustainable tourism.

29. There should be closer cooperation between highways agencies and their respective planning authorities to ensure that:

   a. sustainable travel, including the needs of visitors, is fully integrated into road improvements and new developments; and
   b. there is a consistent strategy to sign National Parks as recognised destinations from the major road network.

August 2016

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