Introduction:

Walkers are Welcome (WaW) is a national initiative launched at Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire in 2007 to encourage towns and villages to be ‘welcoming to walkers’. With rapid expansion there are currently over 100 locations that have joined this innovative community-led scheme benefitting from WaW accreditation. The network is administered by directors and a national executive committee elected yearly by members, all are unpaid volunteers. We will celebrate 10 years in 2017.

WaW enables and assists the development and maintenance of the network of communities across the UK who have demonstrated their commitment to improving the walking environment in their areas, thereby contributing to their communities’ economic, physical, health and mental well-being. Our mission: ‘Towns and villages with something special to offer walkers’. The success is down to thousands of local volunteers passionate about their communities and walking.

Overwhelming evidence has been produced in recent years of the health benefits of walking in maintaining the nation’s health. This encompasses many medical conditions including mental health and improving social and particularly rural isolation. Getting out into the rural areas has been recognised in the new 8-point plan for National Parks, March 2016 including connecting young people with nature. This plan also recognises the national parks growth potential for tourism and drivers of rural economy.

The economic value of rural tourism, and not just in national parks, is recognised by our members. From keeping the village shop or pub sustainable, to supporting bus services and selling additional bed spaces.

A recent study by one of our members found that with a quick calculation, the input into the economy for a week from their walking activities was £14,000. New members usually notice first that they see more walkers about and the pub or shop comments that they are selling more to visitors as a result of a towns’ small early efforts.

Executive Summary:

Despite what feels like a lack of government and agency support for rural tourism, this has fantastic potential and is making considerable growth. There are so many ways that changes in policy, funding and attitudes could make a difference. We highlight some of the issues below:

1. Marketing:

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

1a. Destination Management Organisations
The majority of our members are in rural areas that are not well-known in the mainstream tourism market. It is often for this reason that they wish to promote their towns to increase walking tourism for their communities’ economic benefits. Many members find it very difficult to engage the traditional Destination Management Organisation (DMO) for their location as attention is concentrated on the more established destinations that might arguably be able to look after their own promotion by businesses grouping together or through Chambers of Commerce and councils. Potential is generally sacrificed for easy success of tourism hot-spots. This does not generally promote rural tourism. e.g.

- **Dereham**, Norfolk where Visit Norfolk concentrate their promotion on the Norfolk coast, Norfolk Broads and Norwich.
- **Kirkby Stephen**, Cumbria with Cumbria Tourism promoting ‘Go Lakes’, the Lake District rather than the whole of Cumbria.

Other members, particularly larger towns and where there has been a history of tourism, are slightly better served by either their DMO or council or even Chamber of Trade. e.g.

- **Ross-on-Wye** from Visit Herefordshire and the Wye Valley although this operation is now run from Worcester under the auspices of the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce. ‘Ross-on-Wye – the birthplace of tourism’.
- **Winchcombe** group found that their town and district council would not pay membership to Cotswold Tourism so the volunteers raised the fee for this themselves, £200 per year. 2 years later there is a Visit England entry in the depths of their website.

With various changes in government policy and funding over the years, the framework of DMOs has changed and they often have different remits usually linked to funding sources. There is no equal coverage or exposure for the UK. Rural areas are not generally publicised except within national parks.

Where our members are fortunate in being within a national park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, tourism businesses, towns and villages and community efforts are generally supported. e.g.

- **Shropshire Hills AONB** where we have a number of Walkers are Welcome towns which have been particularly encouraged and of course, the facilities for walking are maintained to a higher standard.

**Visit England** promotes by region as well as some themes e.g. ‘Walking and hiking’ and ‘Countryside’. Whilst the amount of rural destination promotions are increasing, the ‘Editorial Team’ content appears to be fed by nationwide DMOs excluding areas that are not engaged by their local DMO which appears to be the flaw in rural tourism.

The North Yorkshire coast has been singled out by Visit England for notable tourism growth. This is not at all surprising because as well as having attractive towns, villages, coast and public transport, it has a lot of marketing support. There are three mentions for Scarborough and one each for Whitby, Staithes and Robin Hoods Bay plus the North York Moors currently on the Visit England
website. They have destination promotions by Welcome to Yorkshire, Discover Yorkshire Coast, North Yorkshire County Council, Scarborough Tourism Association, North York Moors National Park & Tourism, Robin Hoods Bay Tourism Association and Bayfair, Visit Whitby, the list goes on. Added to this, last year there was the fleeting Tour de Yorkshire and this year the latest and longest 68 miles of England Coastal Path including the Cleveland Way opened in July.

Visit Britain’s website current front page includes the wording ‘breath-taking countryside’ with a spectacular photograph of the Glenfinnan Monument (without the scaffold) and Loch Shiel. The rest of this site tends to promote large towns and cities with some additional stories like Harry Potter and Pokemon. National parks get their own section. Whilst it is important to promote major attractions, it is often the quirky culture and the real British experience that attracts visitors and brings them back. A promotion of the real Britain is almost a success waiting to happen. Our members have also suggested that the Inquiry might examine the budget for promoting London as opposed to rural areas.

Every season has its charm and pleasures in the countryside – even in November. Rural areas are particularly vulnerable to short seasons because of traditional summer only visitors. This makes it very difficult for tourism and most businesses to maintain sustainability.

- It was good to see a promotion suggesting a winter walk and sitting round an open fire in a pub in Appletreewick, Yorkshire Dales National Park on the Visit England website.

Nationwide advertising, preferably TV, with people enjoying winter countryside breaks (e.g. Children playing in the rain, bonfire and firework parties, walking in the frost, building a snowman, hot-tubs and dark skies all celebrating winter weather in rural areas) would considerably help promote countryside businesses outside summer.

1b. Japan
Following one of our directors being invited to Japan, WaW signed a friendship agreement with the Footpath Association of Japan on 6 February 2015.

Having learnt from WaW and the British success of a culture of walking, the Japanese Government now understands the huge benefits that walkers can bring to rural communities, so they are creating a new National Park, a National Trail and WaW communities to bring back visitors.

There has been a number of delegates from Japan on fact finding visits to WaW towns and we are now seeing Japanese independent visitors coming to experience walking in Britain as a holiday rather than the traditional destinations in coach parties. They trust the WaW town destinations.

Seeing the opportunities for tremendous growth, we contacted Visit England and Visit Britain for some support but despite being referred to various departments, we have not received any response to date. We were however contacted recently by the British Embassy in Tokyo asking to use one of our quotes in a speech at the first Mountain Day event in Nagano Prefecture, Japan.

1b. Other overseas visitors
We are also seeing many visitors from overseas coming to take on the challenges of long-distance trails. e.g.

- Broadcasting Julia Bradbury’s Wainwright Walks Coast to Coast in Australia has led to two years of Australians walking this trail. This trail is now more popular with Canadians, Americans, Australians and Dutch than British residents.

The ‘Economic Value of Outdoor Recreation’ was debated in this house on 28 October 2015 with considerable evidence being presented by MPs. However, Visit Britain appears to ignore this on their website despite a growing trend of outdoor recreation and extreme sports particularly engaging younger professionals. It doesn’t all happen in national parks.

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

2a. Public Transport
The fifth item on the WaW criteria is: ‘Show how use of public transport will be encouraged’. We believe that this helps to make tourism more supportable enabling communities to maintain public transport rather than congestion on country roads, parking problems, and pollution. Walkers also like to do some linear walks and trails returning by public transport.

Government cuts to council budgets have led to cuts to non-statutory services which includes public transport, public toilets and tourism. Particularly serious is the removal of rural bus subsidies in attempting to balance budgets with many areas have been left without buses, reduced services or buses connecting to railways.

Councils are also facing subsidising the difference between the government’s funding and the actual cost of providing elderly bus passes. This NoW pass scheme has been phenomenally successful in getting retired people out and about including walking. e.g.

- Hundreds of mainly older people use the X93 bus to alight at Robin Hoods Bay, North Yorkshire, to walk The Cleveland Way, now part of the England Coast Path National Trail.

Private hire vehicles and taxis, if available at all in the countryside, are usually unavailable during peak times because they are engaged on school transport or transporting people to hospitals where there are no alternatives available. There is not therefore a fleet of taxis ready to provide transport where there are no buses.

This is, of course, disastrous for residents in rural areas but further affects tourism possibilities and particularly walking. Visitors from overseas usually rely on public transport when visiting Britain and are therefore often excluded from numerous rural areas.
The many complexities of route, fares, split tickets, advanced tickets and booking trains within Britain away from the mainline railways is difficult enough for residents let alone visitors with perhaps a second language. Some airports have very poor public transport connections and interlinking connections. All these systems require simplification.

Many walkers arrive at our towns on foot along nationwide networks of National Trails and the numerous other long distance paths. See PROW below.

2b. Disabled walking
WaW encourage our towns to have ‘walks’ that are suitable for all abilities. Some examples include Tramper Scooter routes, flat surfaced routes for buggies and wheelchairs and access for all with no stiles.

Highway Authorities have recognised this importance and it did become a priority for Countryside Access Departments but with reduced funding available, we are unlikely to see maintenance let alone improvements of this type without outside funding. The difficulty of funding this type of work has been that ROW (below the surface) are either privately owned or have no owner and it is usually impossible to fund improvements to something you don’t own. Could this be a Big Lottery priority with relevant changes in policy?

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?

3a. VAT
There have been various campaigns supporting the removal of VAT for tourism businesses.

Under EU rules there were a number of ways to implement reductions in VAT. The UK is one of only three EU countries that do not take advantage of a reduced rate for tourism. This means that British families or international visitors choosing a British holiday will pay almost three times as much VAT on their accommodation compared to a French or German break, and twice as much as one in Italy and Spain. Attracting visitors from overseas this appears quite an anomaly as VAT is zero-rated on many exports and often on those same visitors’ purchases.

VAT on accommodation adds considerably to making our budget accommodation uncompetitive. Although many smaller businesses are not registered for VAT they often hold down their turnover by limiting occupancy and so reducing Commercial Rates and not reaching VAT thresholds, leading to poor growth.

3b. Rural marketing support
Rural locations and smaller communities struggle to raise marketing budgets for their destinations. We have discussed the problems of DMOs not supporting smaller tourism initiatives. Raising
further awareness costs a great deal of effort and funding. If DMOs are not going to change, can alternative grant funding be found?

3c. National community funding
All grant funding for communities is based on individual community projects. This means that some of our members may be able to raise grants for some of their projects in their own communities but we, as a national body, have no sources for helping to support all our communities which would arguably be more cost effective.

Additionally there are separate Welsh, Scottish and English funding streams through for instance the Big Lottery but not for national bodies.

4. 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?

Public Toilets
A considerable number of our members are fighting the closure and poor condition of, and new regimes for, public toilets resulting from town or district councils' cost-cutting exercises. Many toilets are in poor condition and have quite disgusting facilities without hot or any hand washing facilities whilst still introducing charges. Some toilets are in car parks where considerable parking fees are not offsetting running the toilets.

Alternative facilities in business premises, where they exist, are not cost effective and soon close or return to strictly customers only. Families are complaining about the total cost of a day's toilet fees.

We are also beginning to see reports of people using bushes rather than paying a fee. This is not acceptable, we need to provide good toilet facilities for visitors if we wish them to enjoy their visit and return. We did receive one report of toilets in Orkney Islands being superior to anything seen in England.

What is the answer? Should the government consider how the cost of facilities for tourism should be met? It is particularly difficult to ask residents to fund such facilities when it is generally large influxes of visitors that use them even if a few small businesses might benefit.

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

This can generally be met by local planning policy rather than government imposed rulings that do not take account of local needs and wishes.
6. 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?*

Public Rights of Way (PROW):

There is a crisis with the maintenance of PROWs after years of council cuts and ignoring issues either because of a lack of funding or enforcement. Our ROWs are the envy of the world, our overseas visitors tell us so. Our walking visitors from Japan, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and other countries all tell us they wish they had similar facilities. PROW’s are the essential ingredient for walking tourism in rural areas. Our WaW towns survey, monitor, fundraise, strim, replace furniture and generally try to maintain and improve footpaths to varying degrees according to their manpower and funding. There is a limit to raising grants for footpath work which is not sustainable in the long term.

How to fund the future of PROWs needs serious discussion and policy to ensure that this world envied fantastic facility is not lost and is well maintained. This might be addressed in post Brexit agricultural policies or by protecting budgets.

National Government must recognise that, just like roads and rail, the PROW network must be adequately funded and supported. This network is not just a bunch of country footpaths but a priceless asset that can produce huge revenue streams if its users, local and from overseas, were confident that when they set out they will have a clear passage through to the end of their walk where they will find excellent accommodation and food. There are different systems in operation in Scotland.

There is still a long way to go in introducing access for all. While there has been schemes over the years these have never been adequately funded and dropped in favour of the next fad before even a dent in improved facilities. This should also be a priority going forward.

In analysing the worth of an excellent footpath and its value to the economy, look no further than the Wales Coast Path. In its first year the path brought £116m into the Welsh economy with 2.8 million people using part of the route. In addition, over 800,000 people booked overnight accommodation.

Ongoing national funding for National Parks, National Trails and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty as well as communities and countryside outside of these designated areas is essential. Our natural rural environment is Britain’s biggest asset.

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