As a long established, successful, Peak District based tourism business, we are well placed to contribute to the DEFRA Select Committee’s inquiry on Rural Tourism.

Pinelog Group owns and operates two award winning holiday letting parks at Darwin Forest Country Park and Sandybrook Country Park where all the holiday lodges and facility buildings have been built by a fellow group company based in Bakewell, which also designs and constructs timber leisure buildings for mainly tourism related businesses throughout the country. Darwin Forest Country Park and Sandybrook Country Park together have over 160 holiday lodges which enjoy high occupancy levels and typically host around 640 people at a time.

Introduction

In rural areas such as the Peak District tourism is the mainstay of the economy. As traditional industries decline, it is becoming all the more important that tourism flourishes and is able to make a key contribution to the socio-economic well-being of rural communities. Despite its importance, tourism, and particularly rural tourism, is seldom given the recognition it deserves by Government. The Government’s own tourism strategy as outlined in the DCMS ‘Five Point Plan for Tourism,’ although worthy in its intention, makes little or no reference to rural tourism. It can only be hoped therefore that DEFRA’s Select Committee inquiry will give due recognition to the special nature of rural tourism and ensure that government policy supports its continued and sustained growth.

The Select Committee has specified that it will examine a number of issues as they relate to rural tourism. The evidence supplied by Pinelog Group aims to address each issue in turn

Marketing

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

The recently announced England Growth Fund should be welcomed, as should the efforts of VisitBritain to highlight countryside destinations in its overseas marketing campaigns. It is a fact however, that in terms of the lucrative international market, London continues to predominate. Whilst Heathrow and Gatwick remain the principal gateways to this country, this pattern is unlikely to change radically although the Benelux market offers opportunities for people prepared to take a car ferry and tour England. It is vital however, that rural destinations in particular are given greater visibility if their market share, both domestic and international, is to be increased. Rural destination partnerships should be encouraged to better coordinate the marketing efforts of their local public and private sector interests. What little resource that exists to market rural destinations on national and international stages is often poorly coordinated and therefore lacks impact and market cut through. Fully developed destination marketing plans should be drawn up with the input of public and private sector interests.
Access

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

Simply put, rural transport providers are not encouraged by government to give due weight to the needs of visitors. In the main, routes, timetables and frequencies are not designed with the tourist in mind. Often a tourist will arrive at a train station to find no onward public transport connection. The problem is exacerbated by lack of point of arrival information for visitors. An issue recognised by government for some time but with little evidence of anything being done to address it. Equally, some good practice exists in respect of rural transport service provision for visitors but little is done to encourage its expansion.

Access for employees to and from rural tourism businesses should also be given fuller consideration by transport planners and providers. Tourism employees often work unsocial hours and face unreasonable costs for transport to and from their place of work as a result. Darwin Forest Country Park, the larger of our parks, is situated on a busy B road that links important communities but it is not served by any bus route. The 150 plus employees have to have their own cars or be able to get lifts. This makes recruitment very difficult as many good candidates are not able to travel to and from work.

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?

Planning and regulation: What, if any, changes are needed to planning and other regulations covering rural areas of special character, such as National Parks, to encourage sustainable tourism?

In the current fiscal environment, one has to question whether public funding should be used to develop business start-ups, let alone to provide funding to keep businesses afloat. Soft loans to encourage business improvement and/or innovation, thus making businesses more competitive, might be a fairer, more dynamic solution.

Under no circumstances should development that blights the visual impact or is detrimental to an area’s special character, be allowed. As with earlier comments on rural transport, planning authorities, particularly National Park Planning Authorities should give greater recognition to the vitality promoted by a thriving tourism industry. As such, the requirements of rural tourism businesses to develop sensitively and sustainably should be actively encouraged by planning authorities, rather than discouraged as is sometimes the case.

Darwin Forest Country Park and Sandybrook Country Park are both situated a few fields outside the Peak District National Park and as such fall within the planning auspices of Derbyshire Dales. It is interesting to note that the Peak District National Park is one of very few national parks that will not allow quality holiday lodge developments and Derbyshire Dales has a policy of not allowing lodge developments that can be seen from a public footpath or right of way. Less than two miles from Darwin Forest planning comes under
North East Derbyshire, a much less rural authority, and they have just granted permission for a lodge development immediately adjacent to the busy B road previously mentioned. Planning policies need to be consistent.

**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?

Infrastructure issues, as they relate to rural tourism businesses, can and should be addressed through a dedicated government policy on rural tourism. To the best of our knowledge, no such policy exists. Skills equally, should be considered in the round and organisations such as People 1st should be encouraged to address the specific issues of tourism employment in rural areas, rather than through the generic support currently provided.

Infrastructure and skills, although separate issues, find common cause in planning. If planning permission is not given for appropriate staff accommodation in rural areas then businesses often find it difficult to employ the level and quality of staff needed to service their operations.

Although perhaps not strictly an infrastructure matter, broadband and mobile connectivity remains a major issue for rural tourism businesses. Guests at our two parks expect to have access to fast reliable broadband as do we in operational terms. Not having such access, as is currently the case, disadvantages us greatly. More should be done to ensure that superfast broadband providers prioritise the roll out their service to rural tourism businesses.

**Local environment and character**

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

Local policies are most critical to the enhancement of local distinctiveness. Tourists visit places; those places need to be special in character and nature if they are to survive in today’s competitive environment. Local planning policy, supported by national policy should seek to strike a balance between the ever increasing globalization of many market town high streets and that of local traders and suppliers.

**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?
As stated earlier we are not aware that Government has an expressed policy for rural tourism. Given the fragility of the sector in rural areas and given the fact that most other developed and even emerging nations have such a policy, it seems eminently sensible that DEFRA itself should develop and lead such a policy. If carefully considered, widely consulted on and robustly monitored when established, a rural tourism policy for England could do much to ensure the fortunes of rural tourism businesses and communities are given full and proper consideration. A rural tourism policy, if properly monitored by DEFRA, would hold to account all other government departments whose own policies impact on rural tourism. A clearly expressed policy would ensure a coordinated and efficient response to the needs and opportunities presented by rural tourism across government. Currently it is our firm view that such a joined up approach is sorely lacking.

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