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

1. London & Partners does a fantastic job promoting London, but as it no longer has the statutory responsibility (nor the funding to support this), cannot act as gateway to the regions. Promotional opportunities are scarce to those with limited budgets to promote on their vast, busy digital platforms. The current webpage that offers Day Trips from London has a range of sightseeing options for first time visitors and leaves little room for smaller destinations with perhaps none of those obvious ‘must see attract brands’ but plenty to attract the repeat visitor, or are simply easier to get to from the Capital.

2. Whilst we recognise the need to promote to ‘attract brands’, we feel there is plenty of room to promote the wider offer that makes England the distinctive and attractive destination it is, provided clear segmentation and target marketing is undertaken. Our market continues to be dominated by those destinations with the deepest pockets.

3. There are plenty of Destination Marketing/Management Organisations (DMO’s) of various descriptions who continue, despite massive funding cuts, to promote their area. This tends to follow county lines which mean very little to consumers, is rarely joined up and with content often based on which business can pay for inclusion on various web platforms. This results in offers that are not representative of what the destination has, is a disservice to business, but most of all, promotes a skewed visitor offer - a wasted opportunity!

4. This is mirrored in how Visit England divide up the country across county lines which makes no sense to a destination such as ours in the Chilterns which crosses four counties. This presents us with practical problems and barriers to participate.

What needs to be done? A change in approach away from what makes it easier for the bureaucrats to what makes is more appealing to potential visitors.

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

1. Access is not only about travel, it’s about the value and worth of information available. Consumer trends continue to point to consumers using fewer ‘official’ digital platforms upon which to base their travel purchasing decisions. The market is full of direct B2C
channels that are often more successful than official platforms that don’t always give an unbiased or accurate destination offer - see point 3 above.

2. Transport remains a problem however; there is not enough of the right type that allows for accessible choices to travel from well-serviced regional railway stations (hubs), to often hard-to-reach in-destination visitor attractions. As long as there is no joined up and integrated transport solutions/strategies to move the visitor from regional rail hubs for example to visitor attractions, the visitor spend statistics are not going to improve across the regions.

3. Train operators do not consistently promote tourism, despite the clear links between off peak leisure opportunities that can fill empty seats. The leisure traffic to the Harry Potter Experience in Watford on the London Midland line is an example of this working.

4. Too many failed local transport plans that are not practical, attractive or viable, that fail to grasp an understanding of how visitors buy their experiences and what they need to access them; a bus route that includes one bus in the morning and another in the afternoon is not a solution.

5. Greater integration and communication consistency between London & Partners and regional transport providers.

6. Support new technology and innovative transport solutions that better fit tourism and leisure.

7. Too many local business within tourism honeypots (on the high street typically), do not see themselves as being a part of the visitor economy, thus will not support, collaborate nor lobby when there are opportunities to do so.

What is needed? We are stuck in second gear, churning out the same-old 2-4-1 offers. Compel transport companies to recognise that by supporting the tourism economy, they can fill empty seats. The solutions are there to grasp, but cannot be accomplished by individual destinations alone.

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?

1. We recognise there will never be the levels of public-sector funding the industry has benefited from in the past, but we are in a situation where the local councils are closing (or have closed) facilities, laid off staff, and have still not realised the benefits a robust local
visitor economy can have for business, residents and visitors. We need help to lobby our business case.

2. The changes in the way rates are collected surely represent an opportunity for tourism businesses being able to benefit from some re-investment back into the local economy.

3. Reduce the amount of bureaucracy and paperwork that accompany funding applications; many business are put off, don't have the time or resources as the administrative pain far outweighs any potential economic gain.

4. There is not a transparent process for applying to the LEP’s to support regional tourism programmes.

What needs to be done? Reduce the amount of bureaucracy.

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?

1. The provision of high speed broadband is a disgrace. Too many business are still not able to access the market, nor sell their products efficiently due to poor broadband provision.

What needs to be done? Open up the market.

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

1. We believe the language needs to change. The protection of our heritage, including landscape includes the enjoyment, access, appreciation and love of local assets. Sense of place goes a long way to achieving this, but is not always promoted as such.

What needs to be done? Innovation and a change from from negative language to positive, appealing and inclusive language.

Defra role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affair 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?

1. Defra could reduce the amount of bureaucracy and paperwork it generates by looking at the balance between good fiscal governance and practical assistance with funding
applications that are less onerous for small businesses (who spend all their time making sure their business succeeds), not having to fill out paperwork for paperwork sake for grants that are often too large to be practical.

2. Defra could do much more to promote the importance of rural tourism because of the value it can bring to local communities, career opportunities and enhanced enjoyment and wellbeing of the environment for locals and visitors.

3. Defra could do much to break down the silo’s that operate across England as each county competes for visitors, often duplicating effort, even ignoring natural assets that have no obvious champions or supporters with resources.

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