Thank you for inviting responses on rural tourism. The Chilterns Conservation Board wishes to make the comments as detailed in the attached Appendix 1 by way of response. The Chilterns Conservation Board is a body that represents the interests of all those people that live in and enjoy the Chilterns AONB. It is made up of representatives nominated by the organisations listed in Appendix 2.

Appendix 1: Our Response

Chilterns Conservation Board response – Inquiry into Rural Tourism, July 2016

1. The Chilterns Conservation Board is grateful for the opportunity to submit information to the Inquiry.

2. Our response is set out below:

Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should the Government do to support this work?
As figures from Visit England indicate, rural tourism has a small share of the overall tourism market and this share has reduced over the last few years. Rural destinations have lost out to London and iconic cities such as Oxford for a number of reasons:

- The Chilterns AONB is typical of many rural destinations in that it straddles several different country boundaries with funding and resources channeled via those local authorities. It is difficult and time-intensive to get the various authorities to collaborate and promote a destination outside their area.
- Rural areas are competing with global brands in cities such as London and Oxford which have dedicated agencies to promote and develop tourism and substantial resources. There is no equivalent for rural areas; agencies such as Tourism South East that used to promote tourism in rural areas no longer receive public funding to do this. There are few publicly funded tourism staff left in the Chilterns.
- The Chilterns has many small visitor attractions and leisure businesses. Collectively this adds up to a substantial offer, but the lack of major iconic attractions means that the value of tourism is often overlooked and there are no major players to lead the sector.
- There are DMO’s of various descriptions who continue to promote their area but normally following county boundaries which means very little to consumers. The content is often based on businesses paying for inclusion which means the rural areas and smaller attractions are usually absent or under-represented.
- London and Partners no longer have the statutory responsibility (nor the funding), to act as gateway to the regions. Promotional opportunities are scarce to those with limited budgets. The current page that offers Day Trips from London has a range of sightseeing options for first time visitors which includes the major attractions, but leaves little room for smaller destinations even though they have plenty to attract visitors.
Whilst we recognise the need to promote the landmark attractions, we feel there is plenty of room to promote the wider, rural offer that makes England a distinctive and attractive destination. The AONBs are ideal conduits for developing and promoting tourism in rural areas and tourism funding could be channeled directly through the AONBs:

- They promote special geographic areas which have their own identity rather than artificial administrative areas which do not mean anything to visitors.
- The AONBs are well placed to balance the growth of the visitor economy with the need to preserve the landscape and character. The ‘Our Land’ initiative was a good example of the AONBs working together to promote sustainable tourism.
- The AONBs operate at a local level and know their patch. They have the networks of contacts needed across the various sectors (tourism, farming, landowners).
- The AONBs provide an opportunity to disperse visitors from Oxford and London where there is insufficient accommodation stock in the peak season – the rural areas can relieve the visitor pressure.

There is a lack of understanding of tourism as a sector and its value to rural areas. This is due in part to a lack of robust data which quantifies the economic and social value of the protected landscapes. More supporting data to help the protected landscapes justify investment in tourism would be very valuable.

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

In the Chilterns, as with many other AONBs, there is already good access provision for walkers– an intensive network of rights of way, promoted routes and National Trails. We feel the Government should focus on maintaining and promoting what’s already there rather than investing in completely new access such as the Coastal Path which will face the same sustainability issues as the existing National Trails. The existing 15 National Trails and the rights of way network have been suffering from reduced funding for many years and this is beginning to impact on the quality of the routes.

Where new housing developments take place adjacent to protected landscapes, new and improved access links should be integrated, enabling people to walk and cycle from their home to the countryside.

**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?**

The Leader programme has been very effective in the Chilterns AONB at helping to support and encourage rural diversification and we have seen some great example of this. The Chilterns Conservation Board has been the beneficiary of a Leader grant in the last two rounds and the projects have had a lasting legacy. We would like to see a continuation of this type of grant scheme which encourages rural diversification. However this third Leader round is overly bureaucratic and has deterred many rural businesses from applying –the size of the grants do not justify the time input. Other recent rural tourism grant schemes such as Defra’s ‘Grant for Championing Great British Food Tourism’ are similarly very welcome in principle but the process needs to be simplified.
The Local Enterprise Partnerships are a potential source of funding but the application process is not transparent and in the Chilterns the LEPs favour major infrastructure projects, we have struggled to generate interest in visitor economy projects.

**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?**

Better protection of protected landscapes so that they are not degraded. This is the most important role of planning and regulation in rural areas of special character. Tourists will not want to visit National Parks and AONBs if they lose their special qualities and natural beauty. In the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty it is proving very difficult to conserve and enhance natural beauty because of the pressures for development; such as the proposed new High Speed Two railway, numerous major housing development proposals, planned new roads, the electrification of the Great Western Railway, erection of telecoms masts and roadside clutter. Some of these major projects are outside the planning system, e.g. permitted development rights are being used to erect overhead rail electrification equipment through the attractive Goring Gap in the AONB. Permitted development rights should be different in protected areas compared with the undesignated countryside. National planning policy is clear that great weight should be given to natural beauty in National Parks and AONB, but in practice it is frequently insufficiently valued or other priorities win out (e.g. housing need, economic growth, national transport infrastructure). Planning applications tend to be assessed individually, not appreciating the cumulative effects of loss of natural habitat, erosion of character, increases in traffic, more noise and light pollution and water abstraction to serve development. We must, in considering the total quantity and appropriateness of development, take into account the long view – what will the AONB look like in 100 or 200 years from now, will future generations be able to enjoy it as much as current do and will the AONB still be providing the benefits to society and the economy which it does now, like clean water and millions of recreational visits?

Planning policy for economic development both in the NPPF and in local plans often focuses on finding space for new B class jobs. In protected landscapes policy should cater for tourism and sustainable lased-based rural businesses rather than developing new business parks on the edge of settlements or allowing farm buildings to convert to housing. Economic growth in National Parks and AONB should be linked to tourism, visitors, local food, recreation, local community needs and land-based industries or farming and forestry. The high quality environment and natural beauty of the Chilterns AONB should be recognised for the economic benefit it brings, with potential to expand sectors such as local food, wood fuel, sustainable tourism, rural skills, film and TV locations, and diversification of the rural economy in ways which are sympathetic to the AONB, involve land management practices which maintain its special qualities, raise its profile as a destination, and are connected to the local distinctiveness and charm of its landscapes, market towns and riversides.

The tourism industry is threatened by the closure of village pubs and loss of traditional hotels. This is driven by policy relaxations which have put new housing top priority and allowed (sometimes without planning consent) changes to high value residential or retail uses. For example in the Chilterns AONB, historic hotels like The Springs at Wallingford and Uplands Conference Centre at Cryers Hill have closed for residential reuse, despite a shortage of
tourist bedspaces locally. More planning protection should be provided for mainstays of the rural visitor experience: village pubs, village shops and hotels.

**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?**

- Transport from railway stations to rural attractions and destinations is often very limited. In the Chilterns the train links are fast and frequent but the bus links from the rail hubs are often lacking.
- Train operators do not consistently promote tourism, despite the clear links between off peak leisure opportunities that can fill empty seats.
- There needs to be greater integration and communication between London and Partners as the official DMO and transport providers.
- The DfT Sustainable Transport Fund was effective in helping with rural transport solutions in many destinations. In the Chilterns it helped to fund a 3 year Cycle Chilterns project which improved cycle facilities at railway stations and encouraged more visitors to access and explore the Chilterns by bike. We would welcome a continuation of these type of funding programmes. There is great potential to develop electric bike hire, which is very popular in many rural destinations in northern Europe, but is still at the very early stages here.
- There is no consistent policy amongst train operators regarding bikes on trains, each train operator has its own policy and many train lines require pre-booking or have very limited capacity which makes it cumbersome if not impossible for visitors.

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

**Defra role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do to ensure government departments support rural tourism?**

This consultation is an important first step, and will help to establish some key principles and findings. Defra has a vital role in highlighting the findings of this consultation and flagging up opportunities amongst the government departments.

3. The Board is grateful for the opportunity to make these written comments and wishes the Select Committee well in the next stages of work. If we can be of further assistance please contact us.

**Appendix 2: About Us**
The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The Chilterns AONB was designated in 1965 for the natural beauty of its landscape and its natural and cultural heritage. In particular, it was designated to protect its special qualities which include the steep chalk escarpment with areas of flower-rich downland, woodlands, commons, tranquil valleys, the network of ancient routes, villages with their brick and flint houses, chalk streams and a rich historic environment of hillforts and chalk figures.

Chilterns Conservation Board

The Chilterns Conservation Board is a statutory independent corporate body set up by Parliamentary Order in 2004 under the provisions of Section 86 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000.

The Board has two statutory purposes under section 87 of the CRoW Act:

a) To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB; and
b) To increase the understanding and enjoyment by the public of the special qualities of the AONB.

In fulfilling these roles, if it appears that there is a conflict between those purposes, Conservation Boards are to attach greater weight to (a). The Board also has a duty to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the AONB.

Like all public bodies, including ministers of the Crown, local authorities and parish councils, the Chilterns Conservation Board is subject to Section 85 of the CRoW Act which states under “General duty of public bodies etc”

“(1) In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty.”

List of Organisations providing Nominees to the Chilterns AONB Conservation Board

The Chilterns Conservation Board has 27 board members, all drawn from local communities:

- Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire County Councils
- Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough Councils (unitary authorities)
- Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, North Hertfordshire, South Buckinghamshire, South Oxfordshire, Three Rivers and Wycombe District Councils
- Dacorum Borough Council
- The Central Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire Parish Councils (6 elected in total), and
- DEFRA (8 in total).

August 2016