1. Hotel Solutions is a consultancy that specialises in working with English local authorities to help them understand and realise the potential for hotel and visitor accommodation development in their area. We have worked in over 40 rural destinations across England, including the South Downs National Park, the Peak District National Park and a wide range of market towns, rural areas, AONBs and Green Belt areas in Wiltshire, Dorset, Hampshire, East Sussex, West Sussex, Kent, Essex, Lincolnshire, County Durham, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire.

2. In all of our work in England’s rural destinations we have consistently found shortages of all forms of visitor accommodation at weekends and during the main summer months between May and September. Popular rural destinations like the Peak District National Park, Cotswolds, New Forest and South Downs National Park attract strong demand for short breaks and holidays at these times, while many countryside areas provide opportunities for weekend escapes for people living in surrounding towns and cities. Good quality rural accommodation businesses are generally fully booked and turning business away at weekends and during school holidays.

3. This suggests two things. Firstly, a need to increase the supply of good quality visitor accommodation in many rural areas to meet these peak period shortages. Care is however needed to ensure that supply does not increase to such an extent that off-peak business is diluted and accommodation business performance weakened as a result. Growth in staying tourism through increased visitor accommodation supply also needs to be carefully managed to avoid undue harm to the environment and the day to day life of rural communities. There is however clearly a need to increase the supply of rural visitor accommodation if growth in staying tourism is to be achieved in England’s countryside.

4. Secondly, with shortages of visitor accommodation at peak periods, destination marketing and events and product development clearly needs to be focused on boosting
off-peak demand for rural destinations. There is little point in investing marketing spend to generate peak period demand that cannot be accommodated.

5. The quality of England’s rural accommodation offer has improved dramatically over the last 20 years, with many rural accommodation businesses investing continually to meet the ever higher expectations of customers, and a whole range of new, high quality accommodation offers is rapidly developing across England’s rural areas, including boutique hotels and B&Bs in market towns; village and country gastropubs with boutique guest bedrooms; luxury holiday lodge parks; a wide range of glamping offers; and camping pods.

6. Visitor accommodation development, if carefully managed, can bring many benefits to England’s rural area in terms of:

- Allowing growth in staying tourism;
- Providing new uses for redundant rural buildings;
- Strengthening farming businesses and other land-based and rural leisure businesses;
- Creating jobs in rural areas, particularly for young people;
- Remediating previously developed sites e.g. quarries, gravel pits, military bases;
- Supporting village and country pubs.

7. Planning remains a barrier to rural visitor accommodation development, although is improving, particularly where local planning authorities have commissioned research to fully understand the opportunities for visitor accommodation development in their area. There is however often a strong resistance from development management officers and planning committees to new-build development, and accommodation developments of any scale in the countryside, particularly in National Parks, AONBs, Green Belt areas, and other designated landscapes, with often a very stringent interpretation of the guidance on what development can be considered in such locations. There is however a growing recognition of the need for accommodation development in the countryside to increase staying tourism and the economic benefits that it will deliver, and an understanding that carefully designed visitor accommodation schemes, including some of scale, can be
accommodated in rural areas without significant harm to the landscape or the quality of life for local people. There is a need for a more positive and better informed approach to the formulation of planning policies for visitor accommodation development in England’s rural areas, and a more supportive development management approach, with development management teams working more constructively with rural accommodation businesses and land owners to achieve viable visitor accommodation projects that meet the needs of the market and the business, at the same time as protecting the landscape in which they are located.

8. Development management officers and planning committees are often overly concerned with not allowing residential development in the countryside, and as a result sometimes limit the operating season of rural accommodation businesses and/or require a period of closure to deter residential use. This clearly limits the potential for accommodation businesses to extend their season and operate year-round. Many local authorities are however switching to holiday occupancy conditions, rather than seasonal opening conditions, in recognition of the need and potential for rural accommodation businesses to open over longer periods and increasingly year-round.

9. Due to concerns about residential use in the countryside, local planning authorities and development management teams can be reluctant to permit applications for on-site accommodation for managers and staff. Such accommodation is often needed to allow rural accommodation businesses to operate effectively, particularly where they are situated in more isolated countryside locations that are not served by public transport.

10. Another barrier to visitor accommodation development in the countryside can be a planning policy approach that focuses on accommodation development in rural settlements. This fails to recognise that many types of rural accommodation require a countryside location e.g. touring caravan and camping sites, glamping sites, holiday lodge parks.

11. A further barrier to visitor accommodation development in the countryside can be a requirement for accommodation developments to be served by sustainable transport. While it is undoubtedly important to encourage visitor access and exploration by means
other than the car, it must also be recognised that in most rural areas public transport services are inadequate to allow visitors to access rural visitor accommodation establishments, which are thus reliant on customer access by car. A common sense approach is needed on this issue.

12. With the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework in 2012, previous detailed planning guidance on tourism development in the countryside has been withdrawn. NPPF gives only general guidance. There is perhaps a need therefore to look at reinstating and updating more detailed guidance to ensure a consistently constructive and market-responsive planning policy approach for rural tourism in England.

13. Beyond a positive and supportive planning policy and development management approach there are other ways in which local authorities and public sector bodies can support visitor accommodation development in England’s rural areas in terms of:

- Research to understand visitor accommodation performance, market demand, and development potential;
- Initiatives to raise awareness of visitor accommodation development opportunities in their area;
- Accommodation development business advice and information;
- The disposal of suitable council-owned sites and properties for hotel and visitor accommodation development;
- The use of available funding e.g. LEADER of EAFRD to support visitor accommodation development;
- Direct investment in hotel and visitor accommodation development projects – something that local authorities are increasingly doing as a means of generating an ongoing income stream for the council.

14. In conclusion, all of our experience of looking at visitor accommodation development opportunities in England’s rural areas points to a need for local authorities, National Park Authorities, and other public sector bodies to recognise the need for visitor
accommodation development in order to grow staying tourism in England’s rural areas, and to positively support and encourage new accommodation provision through well informed planning policy and development management approaches, and other proactive interventions that can be undertaken.

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