The Dorset Poole & Bournemouth Local Access Forum is a consultative body established under S94 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, with a duty to offer advice on ways of improving public access to the countryside. Its members are all volunteers, with a wide range of perspectives and experience on issues concerning public access to the countryside. The opportunities our RoW network offers to go walking in our beautiful countryside are potentially a key enabler for our tourist industry, so we are pleased to have the opportunity to make this written submission to your inquiry. It is arranged to follow the “key questions” listed on your web site.

Marketing:

The Dorset LAF has tried to encourage local adoption of the “Walkers are Welcome” initiative, but the take up in Dorset has been very limited. Our understanding is that in other areas this scheme has produced significant increases in tourism income. Perhaps the Committee could request evidence from Walkers are Welcome [http://www.walkersarewelcome.org.uk/] on ways of encouraging take up of their scheme? As far as we are aware, Gillingham is the only town in Dorset to gain accreditation, and this has already attracted additional funding to provide for replacing stiles with gates, as well as providing a focus for the creation of an annual Gillingham Walking Festival.

At present the rural tourism industry does little to address the needs of their less mobile potential customers. Currently local authorities have only a very limited role in terms of encouraging the elimination of the unnecessary stiles etc which make it more difficult for people with mobility issues to get out into the rural environment. Although there are a few walks which are wheelchair accessible, the way in which they are marketed to potential users is fragmentary and uncoordinated.

Access:

Probably the biggest single barrier to encouraging visitors to go out walking in our countryside has been the inexorable decline in rural bus services in recent years. Our understanding is that this is a consequence of central government severely reducing the monies made available to Local Authorities to allow them to provide financial support for rural bus services.

To the extent that the right of Coastal Access is an enabler for the tourist industry we are concerned at the protracted timescales associated with its implementation. One section of the Dorset coast was designated in a great rush to align with the 2012 Olympics, but the
sections on either side of this one are now something like 2 years behind their scheduled designation dates.

6 The Open Access scheme defined under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 helps people understand where they can legally “roam” in England, and thus helps support rural tourism. It is therefore a matter of regret that the Government has recently deliberately deferred Natural England’s formal review of Open Access designations.

Funding and fiscal policies:

7 Our experience was that the “Paths for Communities” scheme previously operated by Natural England was a very cost-effective way of improving rural infrastructure, unfortunately it now appears to have been wound down. Could it be revived?

8 The steady expansion over the last couple of years of the range of property development schemes which are exempt from the Community Infrastructure Levy brings with it a reduction in the availability of CIL monies to support tourism related infrastructure projects.

9 Over the last few years we have seen a steady reduction in the resources allocated by our Local Authorities to their RoW maintenance and development functions. Clearly this is to the detriment of rural tourism.

Planning and regulation:

10 We would like to see those responsible for preparing and approving Neighbourhood Plans given more positive encouragement to use these plans as a vehicle for developing a more walker/cyclist friendly environment, which would be of benefit to both residents and tourists.

Infrastructure and skills:

11 We are concerned that the recent DfT Cycling & Walking strategy consultation is very heavily focussed on urban issues, and has little to offer in terms of encouraging people to get out into the more rural environment, or of encouraging cycle tourism. We also see great potential for the development of multi-user trails – possibly taking advantage of the fact that rural areas are often sadly rich in disused railway alignments – which potentially allow people from nearby conurbations to get out into the surrounding countryside in a variety of ways, and taking their spending power with them. In our case the development of parts of the former Somerset & Dorset Railway as the North Dorset Trailway has been a great success, but has received very little public funding, and it is difficult to see it being significantly extended so long as it is almost wholly reliant on volunteer resources. If HM Treasury et al see a need
to stimulate the UK economy then to look for projects such as extending the North Dorset Trailway through to Poole [and to fill in one or two of the missing sections further inland] would be a very good way of doing so.

12 In Dorset there has for many years been an ambition to restore the former railway route from Maiden Newton to Bridport as a multi-user trail, which would connect with train and bus routes, and thence allow eco-friendly tourist access to countryside which is currently largely bypassed by visitors. However the available sources of funding are so restricted that progress has been frustratingly slow.

Local environment and character:

13 We see three issues in this area. Firstly we need policies which make it easier for people to get out into the countryside without a car, both to encourage eco-friendly travel and also to promote a closer sense of engagement with the countryside than you get through a car window. Unfortunately government and local authority policy over the last few years has led to a steady erosion in the provision of rural bus routes, which runs against these objectives.

14 This makes it important that better funding vehicles are made available to encourage the development of multi-user trails. In our area we have seen the very successful development of the Stour Valley Way project, which has created an improved cycle/walking path along the Stour from Hengistbury Head to Kingston Lacy, thus linking together two significant tourist destinations. We would like to see our local authorities much more positively committed to helping deliver such schemes than is the case at present.

15 Thirdly we would welcome policies which promote depth of visitor engagement as opposed to simple visitor counts. For example in Dorset we have world famous geology, and thence an opportunity for visitors to engage with the ways in which geological processes have shaped the landscape and the natural beauty they are enjoying, and thence increase the value-add of their visits. We have seen some success in this area along the South Dorset Ridgeway and through the Jurassic Coast project team, but much more could be done in this area. We also have some key historic sites such as Hengistbury Head and Corfe Castle, but more could be done to help visitors appreciate the heritage which underlies these sites, and thence get visitors more closely engaged with the rural community. There are similar opportunities for developing culture related tourism: in Dorset we see a significant number of visitors who are attracted to Dorset’s role as the backdrop for so many of Thomas hardy’s writings, but it is far from obvious to what extent official policies reflects this effect.

Defra role:
16 We have had great difficulty in understanding what value our Local Enterprise Partnership place on tourism as part of their economic development role, and of seeing evidence of significant LEP funding being made available locally to tourism related projects. Defra should seek evidence that the appropriate sponsoring Departments are offering clear and positive guidance to LEPs on this issue.

*September 2016*