I am submitting this evidence as an individual with multiple interests in rural tourism. I currently appointed by the Secretary of State to the Cotswolds Conservation Board, where enabling visitors to enjoy outstanding countryside is a fundamental role. I have particular experience in rural development policy, from government roles in the UK and internationally. But I also have direct experience of serving rural tourism through a small holiday cottage enterprise and of leading the preparation of a Neighbourhood Development Plan for a small historic town in the Cotswolds.

Your Committee has invited contributions on a number of key questions. I focus on those with the most potential to encourage more visitors, for longer and at all times of the year. The main points I’d like to put to the Select Committee are the need for:

- Better coordination of marketing and tourist information
- Improved rights of access for cyclists and horseriders

Marketing

The Cotswolds area is one of the iconic destinations for both foreign and domestic tourists, but suffers significantly from the fragmented nature of bottom up agencies. It’s a few years now since a Culture Minister visited and encouraged a proper collaborative approach to promotion of the area and its attractions and accommodation. With encouragement from the Cotswolds Conservation Board, a new body has been created – a public private partnership responsible for leading tourism development in the Cotswolds.

Cotswolds Tourism is a membership organisation. The goal is to enable members to work together with the local authorities and other tourism businesses to help manage and promote tourism to the Cotswolds in a “joined-up and co-ordinated way”. Members have the opportunity to promote their businesses on the Cotswolds Tourism website, and benefit from marketing activity and networking events.

There are, however, some real challenges in creating a body with the impact needed to encourage more visitors, both domestic and from other countries:

- the membership fees discourage smaller businesses from joining (£240 per annum is the minimum fee), but like many other rural areas, the economy is heavily dependent on those small businesses. Part of the attraction of our town is that we don’t have a high street full of chain stores; we have a good range of restaurants including a Michelin starred establishment. All could
benefit from attracting more visitors, but few see the benefits of investing in Cotswolds Tourism’s offer.

- the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (the core of our visitor offer) is made up of parts of 12 different local authorities, and several local enterprise partnerships. Some, such as Cotswolds District Council, are heavily committed in promoting the area; others host significant alternative attractions (eg Bath and Stratford-upon-Avon) wholly in their own patch, and don’t have the capacity to contribute a slice to the margins of their areas.

- much of the rural tourism offer comes not only from the smaller businesses, but from the smaller towns. The Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum is promoting good practice among its member town councils, many of which are within the Cotswolds area. Its latest initiative is to encourage “hand held” tours – through which visitors can use their mobile phones to guide them through attractive places and to local businesses. Again, not all the Cotswolds are in Gloucestershire; and the Forum also needs to serve much of the Forest of Dean area.

- many of the market towns have tourist information centres, but every one is funded and organised in a different way – especially as the district councils’ budgets are reduced. In Winchcombe, for example, the Town Council funds the TIC with about £25k annually paid to the Borough to employ staff and cover other costs. By contrast, in Nailsworth the Town Council’s TIC is run by volunteers – cost about £5k annually. And in other tourist hotspots business forums provide the funding.

The Select Committee has asked “how well agencies promote rural destinations” and “what more should the Government do to support this work?” My answer to the first question is that we could do better in the Cotswolds with a better coordinated approach – if, for example, the destination management organisation were able to take a stronger lead. Local engagement in promotion is crucial if websites, mobile phone apps and other information are to be accurate and up-to-date. But regional coordination is essential. It can provide confidence to the users of websites and other information on the one hand, and at the same time deliver better value for money compared with the current fragmented pattern of providers.

The question “What more should the Government do ...?” is a difficult one, at a time when many argue that generally the government should be doing less! My own view is that there is a need for a fairer way of funding the work of bodies such as the Cotswolds Conservation Board and Cotswolds Tourism. The Board has itself initiated a “Visitor Giving Scheme” in which local tourism businesses ask customers to add a small donation towards the conservation work that is essential to maintain the special qualities of the rural area.

Travelling elsewhere in the world, it is now common practice to be asked to pay a per head tourist levy on arrival at accommodation, helping to fund the tourism development agencies. For rural areas like the Cotswolds, such a scheme might apply to all accommodation in the towns that serve the Cotswolds – such as Cheltenham and Cirencester – as well as in the rural area. For those asked to pay,
such a levy would have a clear purpose at the point of payment and reinforce understanding that well managed countryside is not a free good. Rural businesses need to attract visitors to create the income needed to achieve good conservation and management. Hands free mobile guides can attract funds from advertisers, but are more likely to be used by visitors if part of a series covering all the Cotswolds market towns and other attractions.

I recommend the Select Committee to consider how a basic visitor levy might raise funds for rurally driven marketing bodies; and that this might be the alternative route for funding rural development start-ups, replacing the LEADER scheme as we leave the European Union and no longer need to follow the specific rules that attach to that grant scheme (see below).

Rights of access

As Chief Executive of the Countryside Agency in the early 2000s, I was responsible for delivering the improved access to open countryside arrangements – the so-called “right to roam”. We also made a significant input to the legislation that enables the Ramblers and others to identify historic rights of way that have failed to reach the formal maps. In many rural areas, these measures did not deliver much by way of additional public benefits.

Subsequently, as Head of the Scottish Government’s Environment and Rural Affairs Department, I was interested to see the impact on land managers of the legislation in that country to create a formal right of access to all land on foot, cycle, horse or canoe. From an English perspective, of course, it may seem that the Scottish landscape is very different and that providing for public access is far less risky than “down South”. In fact, in the central belt and other parts of Scotland, there are highly cultivated areas very similar to landscapes south of the border.

In my five years in the Scottish Government, I came across only one instance of controversy over their right to roam and no reports of significant damage or costs associated with their new legislation. And there have been very few since. On reflection therefore, I found myself wondering whether the £50m million of government money invested in the English access scheme might have been better invested in an insurance trust fund. Such a fund would be available to landowners and tenants investing in helping people to enjoy responsible access, and to meet claims in the rare cases where visitors do damage.

Last year, the Welsh Government consulted on extending rights of access and outdoor recreation in that country. Their starting point was that walking as an activity generates £562m of additional demand in the Welsh economy, £275m of Gross Value Added (GVA), and around 11,980 person-years of employment. They also quoted the cost of physical inactivity in Wales (£650m a year) and of mental ill health (£7.2bn a year), which improved recreational access could be expected to help reduce. The consultation quoted from Scottish experience:
“Whilst listing a number of examples of problems which Wales could usefully reflect on, evidence from Scottish Land and Estates concludes that “when the picture across Scotland as a whole is taken, the introduction of a public right of access has not caused major problems for landowners”

In one respect, however, the Scottish starting point was behind the rest of Britain, in that rights of way are not generally published on Ordnance Survey maps. It was one thing to have the freedom of open access, but it was another to give visitors confidence to get the best out of it. Over the last decade, therefore, local authorities there have been putting in place “core path networks” where users can be more confident of a well-managed recreational resource.

The greater access rights that have existed in Scotland since 2003 have enhanced the rural economy. Research for Scottish Enterprise suggested that increased mountain bike access benefits the Scottish economy by £46.5 million a year, with indirect expenditure of up to £119 million, and generates over 1,300 jobs. Cyclists spend more money than walkers, in my experience! So, while I recognise that full open access is not a politically feasible option in England now, I believe that rural tourism would benefit from added infrastructure for cycling off trafficked roads.

The EFRA Committee should recommend legislation to enhance the rural cycling economy (and public safety) by providing easier access to cycles on suitable routes away from main roads. For example:

- making it easier for public bodies to identify the owners of land over which tracks pass, so that permissive routes could be tested and created more readily without the whole burden of rights of way legislation
- making it easier to use compulsory purchase legislation to create long distance trails on former railway routes (Geoffrey Clifton Brown MP has been trying to create a recreation route from Kemble to Tetbury on the old railway track, but individual owners are blocking the strategic goal even though when the public interest is significant and should prevail)
- amending rights of way legislation so that all public rights of way are legally accessible to cyclists except where the highways authority judges that is very good reason otherwise
- making it easier to create long distance horse and cycle routes which can be promoted as tourism attractions in their own right – for example a Cotswolds Bridleway (like the Pennine Bridleway) to complement the very successful Cotswolds Way and other walking opportunities (promoted by Winchcombe Walkers are Welcome) that I know from my customers are a key attraction in our area.

From my local experience in promoting rural business opportunities, working with the Market Towns Forum, and leading the creation of a neighbourhood development plan, there are other contributions I could make. The common thread is the frequent lack of drive among people who might well be capable of delivering more successful rural businesses. The Local Enterprise Partnerships need to create an even stronger programme of rural business opportunity development; and in the
Cotswolds area, just as with tourism promotion, we suffer from being a fringe area of several LEPs. By definition rural areas fill in the gaps between bigger centres; local and regional governments are based in those centres; so, rural areas are everyone’s peripheral. The Select Committee should charge bodies like the Cotswolds AONB Board to be the champions of acceptable, sustainable development that conserves and enhances the rural assets and delivers a better quality of life to rural residents and the rural businesses that serve them and visitors too.

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