1. Executive Summary

1.1. Herefordshire view of the role of tourism in supporting rural growth in England

1.1.1. A co-ordinated approach with strong leadership from Government departments is crucial to supporting the rural tourism sector.

1.1.2. There is a sense that the marketing of some rural areas is overlooked in comparison to areas with a larger population and that there is an imbalance in promoting some geographical areas over others.

1.1.3. There is an appetite for a bottom up approach and Government should utilise the on the ground knowledge, wisdom and experience available.

1.1.4. There is a need for the Government to understand that rural culture and heritage has an equal status to that of the built environment.

2. Tourism in Herefordshire

2.1. County overview and background

Herefordshire’s resident population is 188,100 in an area covering 842 square miles. It has a sparse population with the fourth lowest overall population density in England. Just under a third of Herefordshire residents live in Hereford, with about a fifth in the five market towns and nearly half in the surrounding rural areas. Despite other counties having a lower overall population density, Herefordshire is unique in that it has a higher proportion of its population living in ‘very sparse’ rural areas (25%) than average.

2.2. Tourism in Herefordshire

Herefordshire and the Wye Valley is arguably the birthplace of the modern tourism industry, starting back in 1745 when the Dr John Egerton began taking friends on pleasure trips along the River Wye from Ross on Wye.

In recent years the value of tourism in Herefordshire\(^1\) has declined from £449.14m in 2011/12 to £442.81m in 2014/15 and the numbers of people visiting has dropped significantly from 6.86m to 4.98m over the same period. Employment in the tourism sector has risen to 6,668 mostly in food and drink and non-serviced accommodation.

Tourism businesses contribute approximately 17% to Herefordshire’s GVA\(^2\), which in 2012 was valued at £2,825 million.

There is a clear understanding of the reasons people visit the county\(^3\) which can be broken down as follows:

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\(^1\) Source: Herefordshire STEAM Reports

\(^2\) Source: Office for National Statistics and made up of: Hotels and restaurants; Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles and personal household goods; and Transport, storage and communication

\(^3\) Source: Arkenford Perceptions and Awareness Report 2012
• 88% to visit local towns, villages and countryside as well as scenic areas and landscapes
• 82% to enjoy food and drink. In traditional pubs rather than ‘top end’ restaurants
• 77% for the history and heritage
• 65% to attend events and festivals particularly food and craft
• 52% to shop somewhere quirky, unique and independent
• 50% to take part in gently outdoor activity

The people who visit Herefordshire can be categorised into the market segments; with the majority of our existing visitors being Traditionals or Functionals with the opportunity to develop the market by increasing the number of Cosmopolitans and Discoverers visiting the county.

2.3. Consultation

HSFTP consulted with tourism associations and businesses involved in rural tourism in Herefordshire to inform its response to the EFRA inquiry into the role of tourism in supporting rural growth in England; those responses have been used to inform this report.

Responses from Herefordshire will also be included in the feedback being sent to EFRA from the Marches LEP.

3. Inquiry into the role of tourism in supporting rural growth in England

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

3.1.1. Marketing the UK internationally is important, but it is also important to encourage visitors to visit more than the usual destinations of London, Oxford and Stratford etc.
3.1.2. There is an impression that marketing rural areas is overlooked in comparison to larger populated areas and there is an imbalance in promoting some geographical areas over others.
3.1.3. Promotion of England’s rural areas, towns and villages is needed to allow them a better share of the visitor economy.
3.1.4. Co-ordinating the work of the regions would be a benefit rather than all fighting for the same market and duplicating effort and Government should work together and communicate with rural DMO’s.
3.1.5. A national board can provide international recognition and marketing opportunities and regional boards can communicate and cascade information to the rural and other areas.
3.1.6. Government could facilitate a ‘rural areas working group’ to create a marketing campaign and work with the rural LEPs to ensure tourism, food and drink are supported in their areas.
3.1.7. Investment in Tourist information centres, information points and face-to-face support for visitors is vital and would protect an important resource which is in danger of being lost. The internet is a great resource but it doesn’t always work well in rural areas.

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

3.2.1. Improvements are needed to the road infrastructure, including provision of better signage, parking, park and ride opportunities and the maintenance of verges and hedgerows.

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4 Source: Arkenford Perceptions and Awareness Report 2012
3.2.2. Cuts to rural transport are unsustainable, the loss of public transport means visitors are reliant on car usage.

3.2.3. The introduction of seasonal small buses running in circular routes, linking with walking and cycling routes and trails would ensure connectivity between towns and villages in key months.

3.2.4. To complement the public transport system, good maintenance and signage of footpaths, bridleways, cycle routes and other traffic free routes (including the River Wye) is important.

3.2.5. Financial support is needed to maintain the quality of all the different routes including the people or organisations with legal responsibility to maintain them.

3.2.6. With the lack of human resources in and the remoteness of heritage/historic sites in many rural areas there is an opportunity for Virtual Reality to tell the 'back story' and enhance the visitor experience and enjoyment of the countryside.

3.2.7. Integrate transport options for trains, coaches, buses, taxis, etc. and have mapped links to the walking, cycling and other routes so this becomes a viable alternative to car travel.

3.2.8. Introduction parking and public transport “passports” for visitors for flexible movement and fixed costs.

3.3. 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?

3.3.1. Current funding investment to support tourism business is not a level playing field across the UK, and availability is inconsistent.

3.3.2. Funding, or a rural tourism pot, from Government, LEPs or the banks would be welcomed. However there is concern that support and grants is offered to new and start-up businesses over helping existing business. Support should be available to all ages of business.

3.3.3. Grant applications should be made simple and the process needs to be quicker. Delays and irregular availability of funding have a detrimental effect on collaborative partnerships and businesses implementing projects.

3.3.4. Support other than funding is also important to all stages of business so access to funded support from industry experts and dedicated tourism mentoring can help businesses with their next steps.

3.3.5. Support should be available to help businesses with rules and regulations relating to their specific business requirements for example food legislation and health and safety.

3.3.6. Incentives are very welcome and subsidies on business rates, small business rate relief and other taxes subsidies for rural businesses would help start-ups in the sector. VAT rate is an issue due to the seasonal fluctuations in income, higher thresholds would help.

3.3.7. However, there is also support for an additional local tourism business tax which could be used to develop and maintain tourism infrastructures.

3.4. 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

3.4.1. Areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) need to be protected and should be given National Park status to be able to benefit from the same types of recognition, support and protection.

3.4.2. Solutions need to be found for the difficult balance between building rural housing and businesses, agricultural requirements and protecting the rural environment that makes our rural areas unique and attractive to visitors.

3.4.3. Parish and neighbourhood plans need to be observed and new ones developed where they don’t exist.
3.4.4. Landowners are obliged to maintain footpaths and public access to tracks (public rights of way) across their land and this should be enforced.
3.4.5. The 1992 Package Travel Regulations should be reviewed with the intention of making it easier for tourism businesses to create their own package holidays.

3.5. **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?**

3.5.1. Encouraging the development of local and neighbourhood plans can help communities to understand what is needed to help them develop and grow and give opportunities locally including helping young people to remain or return to live and work in rural areas such as by supporting affordable housing and rural business development and looking at using brownfield or other sites in a more creative way
3.5.2. Infrastructure maintenance and development is important to support the rural area; road improvements, bus services, wifi and mobile networks all need investment to compete with less rural areas
3.5.3. Integrate transport options for trains, coaches, buses, taxis, etc. and have mapped links to the walking, cycling and other routes so this becomes a viable alternative to car travel for both visitors and local people
3.5.4. Recruitment in rural areas can be difficult because of the lack of accommodation, distances needed to travel and this need to be considered as part of local and neighbourhood plans.
3.5.5. Developing programmes of tourism training for businesses, with industry experts, could help bring people into the industry. The addition of dedicated tourism mentoring would help businesses with their next steps.

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

3.6.1. The local character and environment can be balanced by encouraging the protection of the unique character of the rural areas by extending national park status, or types of protection to new areas.
3.6.2. Create a national strategy, from local consultation, which allows the unique character of rural areas to remain, while managing the change and development that rural areas require.
3.6.3. Development should be allowed within agreed guidelines appropriate to the character of the local environment and character of the area, but should be informed by the requirements of local people and businesses who live in the rural areas year round
3.6.4. Develop tourism strategies that explain what rural is linking the working life of the country and the agriculture, food, drink, countryside, culture, heritage and different pace of life to and why people should visit and what to expect.
3.6.5. Encourage low impact travel, group travel and invest in the public transport system, good maintenance and signage of footpaths, bridleways, cycle routes, old train lines and other traffic free routes.
3.6.6. A local tourism business tax which could be used to develop and maintain tourism infrastructures within locally developed guidelines.

3.7. **DEFRA role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 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?**
3.7.1. A co-ordinated approach from Government departments is key to supporting the rural tourism sector.

3.7.2. There is a real appetite for a bottom up approach and Government can utilise the on the ground knowledge, wisdom and experience available to get a better balance of people onto committees.

3.7.3. Encourage (and support) regions to develop their individual identities and actively support these at home and overseas.

3.7.4. Encourage Ministers from all Government departments to visit the countryside to understand the complexities.

3.7.5. Resolve the confusion within government departments as to who has the responsibility for tourism and ensure this message gets out to the businesses and agencies involved.

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