Written evidence submitted by the Dereham Walkers are Welcome (RUT0145)

Dereham Walkers are Welcome is a newly accredited member of the Walkers are Welcome family of towns which make it their aim to be welcoming to walkers (see http://www.walkersarewelcome.org.uk/ for full information). The objectives of a Walkers are Welcome town include

- being attractive destinations for walkers with top quality information on local walks,
- offering local people and visitors excellent walking opportunities within their areas, and
- contributing to local tourism plans and regeneration strategies.

In order to secure accreditation, Dereham had to amass supporting signatures amounting to 5% of the population - almost 1000 signatures in our case, demonstrating clear local support.

Our responses to the Inquiry questions are as follows.

Summary

- There is an overlooked role for small, local organisations to contribute, but they will need support (including access to funding) to do so.
- Infrastructure is needed to bring together these organisations with travel operators.

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<th>1</th>
<th>Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should the Government do to support this work?</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>This question seems clearly directed to large national and regional agencies. We would suggest that there would be considerable benefit in supporting and encouraging (and providing funding for) small, local organisations which have detailed knowledge of ‘their’ patch, but lack the means to publicise it.</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
<td>In Dereham, the Tourist Information service closed some years ago. The Library tries to stock material of interest, but has its own set of functions on which it must concentrate, has its own financial pressures to deal with, and is certainly unable to provide a staffed service.</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
<td>As a voluntary, small and newly formed organisation, Dereham Walkers are Welcome has found it difficult to promote its new status and hence the area. In order to develop promotional materials and set up a website (<a href="http://www.DerehamWaW.org.uk">http://www.DerehamWaW.org.uk</a>), we have had to find the funds ourselves, so ended up spending our limited volunteer time undertaking otherwise unrelated activities in order to raise money to pursue our central aims. We have no doubt that many other organisations face the same difficulties.</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>We have joined other local attractions to set up Visit Dereham, with the twin aims of promoting Dereham as a major tourist attraction in Mid Norfolk and improving information available about Dereham to potential visitors. Visit Dereham is experiencing the same difficulties - the constituents have needed to fund a leaflet and have so far been unable to fund the establishment of a website.</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>Producing leaflets and written material is one thing; distributing them is another. Rural areas inevitably incur substantial costs in getting materials around, but there is a further, perhaps more significant problem. In Norfolk, there is a commercial organisation which distributes publicity materials. This organisation charges those bodies wishing to include their material for distribution (and they’re not cheap), and also charges the locations that accept and display them. No doubt the service is...</td>
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good, but it is beyond the reach of small organisations with limited funds. Nor can it be ignored - for understandable commercial reasons, the proprietors remove and destroy any materials it finds which it has not itself placed.

1.6 Further evidence of how the cards are stacked against small, local attractions was provided by the item on the website of the major regional newspaper (The Eastern Daily Press), which on 19 August, and repeated on 25 August, had a feature: “How many of the county’s top attractions have you visited?”. It wisely stated “While visiting the best attractions is a must when on holiday, it is often the sights on our doorstep we overlook” and “We’re hoping to understand how many people living in Norfolk take the time explore the county’s attractions - and what can be done to convert locals to tourists”, but then listed only major locations, with no mention of smaller, very local, attractions.

1.7 We would propose the establishment of a mechanism by which small, voluntary organisations meeting agreed criteria, including publicising their rural area as a tourist destination, can access promotional networks and receive modest funding to support them in doing so.

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

2.1 In the Dereham area, there is a lot of good access already, but we would suggest that there are two main issues which limit access.

2.2 The first issue is public knowledge of what is there to be accessed and what means of access are available. That can be addressed by improved marketing (but see 1 above).

2.3 The other issue is the adequacy of the current means of access. Norfolk as a county has limited rural bus services, and, as in other parts of the country, these are under permanent threat of reduction in the belief that this saves money (which in narrowly focused budgetary terms, it no doubt does, though at the cost of limiting access to rural areas and the many benefits that this brings).

2.4 An illustration (not local to Dereham) of the difficulties can be seen in the Coasthopper service, operated between King’s Lynn and Cromer. This ran as a very successful service which enabled local people to get to and from shopping centres and tourists to reach destinations along the Norfolk Coast, including walkers seeking to use the Norfolk Coast Path (and now the developing England Coast Path). Then funding cuts resulted in threats of closure; these were staved off, but resulted in reductions in service. The website of the current operator (Stagecoach) makes it hard to find information - an entirely separate website (http://www.norfolkcoastaonb.org.uk/partnership/coasthopper-bus/77#) now explains: “The original Coasthopper website that provided comprehensive information on the service no longer operates although the new service operators have introduced a Coasthopper information page. Using the Stagecoach website https://www.stagecoachbus.com you will need to enter CH in the bus number search box for the various Coasthopper routes.” Anyone going to Stagecoach would not immediately know to do this.

The reduced service also carries the seeds of its own demise. So popular has it been that provision has not met demand, leaving people standing at the roadside as the full bus goes by, with the next one not due for half an hour, or maybe an hour, and with no guarantee of catching that one either. What do people do? Next time, they go in the car.

2.5 Dereham’s bus services fall into two categories - First runs an express service between Peterborough and Lowestoft which passes through the town, but has
limited locally useful stops. Konect is a locally based company which operates a range of local services. Its website (http://www.konectbus.co.uk/) states: “Norfolk is a beautiful county with a rich and interesting history. There are lots of sights to see and places to visit and we have highlighted some of our favourites.”, though the favourites are once again the well recognised honeypot destinations.

2.6 Dereham has no national rail service. It is one terminus of the successful and expanding heritage line, the Mid-Norfolk Railway. It does not operate all year round, and even when it is operating, it is not every day of the week, so as a general mode of transport, it is limited. As an attraction, however, it works well, and we have sought to link some of our walks through a ‘ride out, walk back’ approach. Again, establishing and publicising these is difficult.

2.7 We would suggest that if there was infrastructure which enabled the bringing together of smaller tourist destinations and local travel operators, the opportunity for mutually beneficial development could be created and developed.

| 3 | **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? See 2 above in regard to transport. |
| 4 | **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? As 1.4: We would propose the establishment of a mechanism by which small, voluntary organisations meeting agreed criteria, including the promotion of their area as a tourist destination, can access promotional networks and receive modest funding to support them in doing so. |

*September 2016*