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Overview

The sub sections of this submission have already identified many of the issues impacting rural tourism – promotion, access, skills and transport.

My main concern is that it is the current structure of the supporting agencies that is having the most detrimental impact on the rural tourism sector.

Rural tourism does not fit into the tidy box of county or regional boundaries and, with a few exceptions, even less within the LEP structure.

Rural tourism as a whole needs to be seen in a light that is the very opposite of the “localism agenda” and while each individual function, be it accommodation, attraction, food outlet or farm shop, may be the very idyll of “localism”, the sector it is not capable of working together as a whole.

I live within 2 miles of the Oxfordshire / Gloucestershire / Warwickshire boundary, where all three counties come together. It is in the heart of the Northern Cotswolds and in the Cotswolds AONB. Yet, this area was originally in 3 RDA regions, South East, South West and West Midlands – at which point the three regional tourism organisations were unable to share funding and resource. The region is now under the remit of the LEP’s and is suffering from LEPracy of the worst kind – no cross border interaction.

The principal point in the rural tourism sector is the size of the individual businesses. Most are micro businesses and while that is conveniently swept up into SME’s – they are anything but! A 200 staff SME has nothing in common with a family run farm, where the farm is the passion, yet the tourism business, be it accommodation or shop or attraction probably is the profit centre and keeps the family farm afloat.

As such the family do not have the time to engage with marketing organisations and travel to training sessions that start at the time of day that is convenient to the trainer, not someone who finishes serving breakfast at 10am when her guests leave and needs to be back at 4pm when the new guests arrive.

TV’s BBC Countryfile, The Great British Menu and the like have been the best free advertising for the countryside anyone could ever have conceived, and have created a new brand of holiday, however the overarching continued development must come from a centralised bureau, where geography and NOT council boundaries are the determining factors of support and development.

Marketing

A continuous marketing programme is crucial to ensure that RURAL holidays are in the mind of the consumer (see previous note on BBC Countryfile). Destinations that are not in the public eye very quickly drop out of the holiday consumer choice and once momentum is lost it is very difficult to start again and costs even more.
Rural Marketing should be driven centrally with geographic targets supported, e.g. Cotswolds, The Peak District, both of which are in at least 4 separate counties.

Also non-tourist destinations with beautiful countryside, Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire for instance, should be given the support and promotion they need to help their rural communities survive.

This is emphasised when a rural B&B with 3 rooms might only turnover £20,000 a year, yet support 2 full time jobs and keeping the owners off of social security; where do you expect them to find the money to join their local tourism agency or pay large commission to the OTA’s?

Strong rural marketing keeps people in jobs, extends the rural economy for handymen, gardeners, food producers, their guests use local shops, pubs and cafes, and other facilities, who then pay tax and costs much less than social security.

A more centralised programme will also support regions with little or no local tourism programmes and help them by being inclusive and not exclusive within a wider rural tourism marketing programme.

Access

Transport will always be a huge issue for the countryside. The car will remain the form of access that will bring the bulk of the guests to the countryside – however guests should be encouraged to abandon the car once in location.

With trains frowning on bicycle transport, even the current trend for two wheels is hampered by the very mode of transport that the government wants to champion for the future.

Access by train should be supported by some logical and cheap facilities such as bike racks on rural buses. This idea was championed in Scotland by Sir Brian Souter (StageCoach) several years ago but is something that is yet to appear in England. Bike Banks, such as that in Yorkshire could also help to drive this.

Funding

The grants being made available for most businesses are too BIG!

Many grant programmes want a minimum of £25,000 or similar amounts, whereas most rural tourism products just want a few thousand to help upgrade their existing facilities to 2016 standards.

We get that writing one cheque for £25,000 is easier than 5 cheques for £5,000 but this is what the industry needs.

It is an oxymoron that needs to be addressed. It also makes match funding more realistic as the owners (see £20,000 turnover) can actually afford to play.

Think small – not big, but that goes back to understanding micro-businesses – not SME’s.
Planning and Regulation

Put the Tourism Planning guidance back in to the planning guidance – taking it out has had a huge detrimental impact on tourism offerings as it makes it easier to say no rather than yes. NIMBYism impacts local planning – but perhaps those making the decision don’t understand the economic impact of a good rural business on their area.

Infrastructure

Rural broadband – where do you start!

One point that is frequently overlooked is that many businesses, accommodation ones in particular, need a larger “upload” speed to help manage their websites and availability calendars, yet this is something that is frequently overlooked. Some people might manage with a 2mb download speed, but upload speeds are usually 10% of this and trying to manage with 200kb is practically impossible.

Signage is also expensive and perhaps local councils could look more favourably on supporting remote businesses.

Skills

It was very disappointing that the most recent round of LEADER funding focused on capital development and not on training and skills. Also that some areas didn’t even get a LEADER programme at all.

The IT environment in particular is changing the most rapidly and trying to ensure that business owners are kept up to speed remains crucial and is probably of the highest priority.

I am also concerned that the responsibility for “Quality” is being passed from the likes of VisitEngland to the consumer – however the consumer grades the experience and the Assessment organisation graded the facilities. These should not be confused especially as removing the interaction from an Assessment organisation also exposes the owners to changes in the law such as Health and Safety, Environmental Health and the like.

This is particularly true in the world of the “sharing economy” where ensuring that businesses have public liability insurance, fire risk assessments, access statements that are required by law are completely being ignored by AirBnB and similar. This will only be taken seriously when someone is badly injured in a fire or worse.

Summary

I believe Defra has a role to be the provider of the overarching programme that the rural tourism community needs – not just for honey-pots but for the whole of the rural tourism family. Someone has to be responsible for the micro-businesses and the small struggling businesses who operate on a knife-edge of profitability but able to understand the wider financial impact of social security and other government departments.

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