1. Executive Summary

- Continued investment into Broadband to improve connectivity is vital
- Continued investment supporting websites and social media opportunities
- Clarity post- Brexit of the continuity of financial support to provide confidence to invest

2. Introduction

The YFFRN welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence for the above inquiry. The YFFRN champions the needs of farming, agri-food and rural businesses enabling them to become more resilient, competitive and sustainable. The Network achieves this by articulating farming and rural issues and by collaborating to develop solutions to the problems these businesses face. Made up of employers, key trade bodies and rural support agencies the Network is Yorkshire’s food, farming and rural collective voice able to influence Government at a national level. Within Yorkshire the Network provides a key source of advice on issues, concerns and good practice to organisations such as the Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Authorities and Defra. This submission has been prepared by Ms Margery Moore, YFFRN Chair and Ms Jan Thornton, Vice Chair YFFRN.

3. Comments

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

Destination marketing is really important and should be directly supported by Government. Rural businesses often feel very distant from the regional and national agencies.

Government could ensure there is better web presence internationally, e.g. on respective European Google sites which are most likely to attract the independent foreign visitor to rural England.

Consistency of presentation between Visit England and the county level DMO websites for international online visitors could be improved in respect of:

- the number of languages in which information is available
- website addresses locally, regionally and nationally
• greater use of web links nationally and regionally - at present there appears to be duplication/lack of consistency and a lack of cross linkages with other useful websites with complementary information, e.g. sustrans.org.uk; www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk.

Policies also need to be reviewed to accommodate the power of social media and sites such as Trip Advisor. Local knowledge and endorsement is vital in harnessing the potential of any given area.

Now that websites such as Booking.com and Expedia.co.uk have expanded to include Bed and Breakfast (B&B) this provides a wider profile opportunity especially for attracting foreign visitors looking to visit rural areas. However, there are challenges in the independently owned accommodation sector, such as:

• high commission charges which many small B&Bs feel are eroding their already low profit margins
• a significant number of B&B owners looking to retire in the foreseeable future
• budget hotel operators such as Premier Inn and Travelodge are expanding into some smaller market towns, providing greater competition for small independent businesses

The promotion of the ‘local’ food offer is also important and there could be greater promotion of British farming, food and drink production/processing, (especially in view of the decision on BREXIT). Government support to organisations such as Delicious!Yorkshire will enable them to further promote their members, who include producers, processors, farm shops, cafes and other eateries which all feed into the local economy.

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

There is no consistency across the rail networks regarding carriage/booking ahead for transfer of bicycles which acts as a barrier for the increasing market for short cycling breaks.

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?

There could be work undertaken between the LEPS, their various strategies and funding opportunities to create a more consistent approach, e.g.:

The (Leeds City Region) Strategic Economic Plan states:‘...Delivery of action and investment by others linked to destination planning, will help to implement ESIF priorities.’
LEADER areas do not always tally up with tourism areas: e.g. in the Sheffield City Region covers both the Peak Park and some of the Staffordshire Moorlands. The East Peak area is in the SCR and Leeds City Region (LCR) and also ‘Welcome to Yorkshire’.

As yet, the future availability of EAFRD funding after the Autumn Statement is as yet unknown. This support will need to continue in the short term and post Brexit. LEP/ESIF funding in isolation will not create a substantial impact on the rural visitor economy.

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?

Signage is an issue with the criteria for brown tourism (highways) signs being too prescriptive for smaller rural businesses to qualify. Many businesses choose to promote themselves using their own signs. Most of these are illegal in planning terms although often a blind-eye is turned unless a complaint is made. Business owners fear that if they make a formal application for planning for their signs they will be refused so it has become common place to erect signs without consent. A review of the system would be helpful to see if it could be made fairer.

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?

Broadband: the rural broadband programme needs to be rolled out further into rural areas. Visitors demand a decent broadband service. With the rise of social media we can no longer presume that people want to ‘get away from it all’. Equally, visitors uploading their holiday snaps are a great way of promoting business. Apps are increasingly becoming useful as a visitor tool.

Businesses need access to training such as Welcome Host. Marketing, Social Media and IT training also need to be readily available ideally delivered at a local venue with a time frame that suits the tourism industry.

Much of the tourism industry is dependent on a migrant workforce. There is a potential pressure if free-movement of people is lost post Brexit.
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?

There needs to be investment to ensure sustainable economic rural communities rather than large scale growth. Small towns often act as service hubs for jobs and visitors alike. Low incomes in more rural and remote parts are in part linked to the extent of the agricultural and tourism sectors. In some parts the high cost of housing in the popular tourist areas (due to significant numbers of second home ownership), continue to be an issue. A long term sustainable approach to development that balances the needs of the environment and looks at the future roles of settlements will be important. Care must also be taken to ensure that new development takes into account the local vernacular to ensure the ‘character’ of the settlement is not lost. This also includes attention to appropriate street furniture.

- The Yorkshire LEPs have identified some actions required:
- a need to invest in the infrastructure to enable new employment and housing land to be made available
- new facilities to exploit new growth opportunities,
- improvements to raise the quality of the coastal visitor offer
- sustainable local economic development including recognition of the role of the natural environment in functions such as water management, maintaining biodiversity and attracting ‘eco-tourism’
- As the tourism market has changed, resorts need support to widen and upgrade their offer

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?

DEFRA need to have an oversight role with rural development and countryside stewardship. In the context of rural tourism there may be scope for a promotion role for farm diversification.

The EAFRD focus for the Leeds City Region and York, North Yorkshire & East Riding LEPs are for Broadband and Tourism. Despite this, the target speeds for connectivity still mean that rural businesses will be left woefully behind the majority of the country as this continue to improve and this needs to continue to be addressed. Mobile signal is also still an issue.