Written evidence submitted by the Ride Yorkshire Foundation (RUT0170)

Key points:

Equestrians
- More emphasis should be placed on the needs of leisure horse-riders in rural tourism planning.
- This includes better access in terms of horse-friendly trails and parking areas.

General
- There should be more focus on the needs of ‘non-traditional’ categories of rural tourism users such as younger people and ethnic minority groups.
- Up-to-date research should be carried out into current leisure trends within tourism in rural and protected areas.

Introduction

This submission has been prepared to support government policies on the three areas outlined in the EFRA inquiry into the role of tourism in supporting rural growth in England, namely to:
- encourage more visits and longer stays by domestic and international visitors to England’s rural places and reduce seasonality
- support diversification and business growth in tourism by farmers and rural residents, and
- ensure that visitor experiences are balanced with protection of environmental and cultural heritage.

Our response follows the key questions provided in the EFRA inquiry, although the points on Infrastructure & Skills and Local Environment & Character have not been addressed. Our recommendations aim to support the creation of resilient tourism systems in protected and rural areas (i.e. linked social-ecological systems able to respond to changing market trends). We highlight in particular the needs of leisure horse-riders and also include general points.

The submission has been written by Dr. Janet Cochrane, a rural tourism consultant and director of the Ride Yorkshire Foundation, which promotes leisure riding in Yorkshire. Our points are based in part on consultation with Ride Yorkshire supporters and has been prepared because of the notable lack of attention to the requirements of leisure equestrians in rural and protected area planning policies.

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

1. Facilities for equestrians such as new or improved trails should be marketed
more effectively through appropriate channels, for instance through social media or through intermediaries such as Bridleways groups, British Horse Society Access Officers, and service providers such as Ride Yorkshire.

2. The Government should facilitate links between providers and markets and support small businesses and micro-enterprises with better promotional strategies and techniques, for instance through better low-cost websites and use of social media. Many providers are small or micro-enterprises and lack the skills or capacity to lead on initiatives of this kind as individuals, whereas economies of scale can be achieved via external assistance.

3. Tourist Information Centres should continue to be supported in key locations such as national parks and AONBs, but more important is the creation of online visitor information, especially to draw international tourists and help both domestic and overseas visitors decide to visit an area in the first place. In some cases public funding is needed to ensure that relevant providers are grouped in promotional websites, particularly as regards specialist providers. Currently they are often included in Tourist Board, National Park or AONB websites, but people seeking specialist information do not necessarily visit these for information.

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

4. Current leisure trends affecting recreational use of national parks and other natural / rural areas include the avoidance of risk and an increased safety culture in outdoor pursuits, which lead to greater packaging and regulation of outdoor activities, and the decline in physical activity generally (in the UK as in other parts of the world). Allied to these factors are the decline in relevant outdoors skills such as map-reading, route-finding and self-reliance, and increasing reliance on digital technology and organised activity providers. Policy-makers also need to be more aware of the different preferences of user-groups from different cultures (and sub-cultures).

5. As these trends will be hard (if not impossible) to reverse, at least in the short term, Defra should support agencies and activity providers in ways which comply with them, for instance encouraging enterprises to engage with modern technology, including augmented reality apps. Supporting learning and marketing networks of providers would also be of benefit.

6. Equestrian needs should receive a higher profile in planning for leisure use of rural and protected areas. For instance:

7. Off-road parking areas near networks of bridleways are needed with sufficient space for horse-boxes to park and allow horses to be offloaded / loaded and, ideally, mounting blocks (e.g. large blocks of stone).

8. Finance should be provided to allow proper maintenance of strategic bridleways through consistent clearing of vegetation (at an appropriate height for riders), ensure that bridleway gates are horse-friendly, and provide for improved crossings of difficult areas such as board-walks over boggy areas and fords across rivers.

9. The current rights-of-way network is often no longer fit for purpose. Many routes inscribed on maps in the 1940s/50s begin and end at what are now major roads,
which are unusable by horse-riders. At the time that the public rights-of-way network was designed, leisure riding was relatively restricted and there was little demand for off-road, recreational riding from people who did not have access to land through owning it (or knowing people who owned it). As a result, many routes historically used by horses were incorrectly designated as footpaths. Funding and policies need to be provided to address this situation in supporting the re-designation of some footpaths as bridleways and connecting villages and small towns by off-road routes.

10. Linear routes and long-distance trails are of limited use to riders as they cannot use public transport to return to the start point. Rider access to rural areas would be greatly improved by the creation of waymarked, circular multi-user trails with suitable parking places (as above). Routes of around 8-15 miles (i.e. suitable for day-rides) would be the most popular, while longer routes such as the Mary Towneley Loop (47 miles) where farmers work together to provide horse & rider accommodation and transport bags along the route would also be well supported.

11. Consideration should be given to creating routes specifically aimed at horse-riders in order to avoid potentially risky interactions with other users. For instance horse-riders are now disinclined to use the trails in Dalby Forest (north-east Yorkshire) because of heavy use by mountain-bikers.

12. Generally, there should be more focus on youth and minority groups through policies such as the (now terminated) Mosaic programme, with support for projects which appeal to the recreational preferences of ethnic minority groups and younger people.

**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?

13. To facilitate the creation of more permissive bridleways and other off-road riding routes, it would be helpful to link farm subsidies to the needs of equestrians. Often, rider needs are compatible with biodiversity. Use of permissive trails could in many cases be restricted to certain times of the year e.g. to avoid disturbing ground-nesting birds, or limited to a certain number of days per month. In many cases equestrians are willing to pay for good off-road riding, so encouraging this through subsidies or incentives could result in a sustainable / self-financing income stream for land-owners.

14. Grants or subsidies should be available for business advice and rural start-ups.

15. Generally, comprehensive and high speed rural broadband is central to rural tourism and rural businesses and networks should be supported.

**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?

16. There should be more focus on creating waymarked and surface-hardened multi-user trails that reduce the perception of risk and mitigate the environmental impacts of heavy use. Although these may be unpopular with the 'wilderness
purists’ who are an important component of national park supporters, they are not necessarily at odds with the core principles of national parks, since they can provide a popular facility in intensive use zones while effectively protecting core or wilderness zones, and will also help to broaden the appeal of parks.

17. More resources should be allocated to clarifying the status of UURs before the 2026 deadline. The process of proving historical use by one user-group or another is time-consuming, and there currently appears to be no coordination over ‘claims’ by different groups (e.g. the Ramblers Association, the British Horse Society, Bridleways groups). There is also a considerable backlog within local authorities in processing claims.

18. Particular attention should be given to reducing use of UURs / green lanes by motorised vehicles. Although officially ‘highways’ and generally denoting historic use for trade and other communications, most of these routes are inappropriate for modern vehicles. Challenging routes of the type apparently preferred by many off-road drivers should be limited to commercial providers through farm diversification schemes rather than forming a drain on public finances by forcing Councils and National Park Authorities to maintain or repair these to a standard acceptable to both motorised vehicles and other user-groups. It should be made easier to obtain Traffic Regulation Orders on sensitive green lanes, and sufficient resources should be made available to enforce these.

19. More emphasis on zoning, so that core / wilderness areas are protected while intensive use of buffer or more robust zones is encouraged. This may include, on the one hand, relaxation of planning restrictions to allow more activities of a type appropriate to national parks which attract younger people and ethnic minority groups, and on the other hand, tightening up of planning regulations to deter activities which are damaging to local biodiversity and to the enjoyment of other user groups.

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?

20. A survey of academic sources of information on trends in leisure use of protected areas reveals little up-to-date research applicable to the UK. For instance the Henley Centre assessment of the main factors influencing the future of outdoor recreation was carried out in 2005. Defra should commission a study into the current state of and trends in the motivation and practices of outdoor leisure pursuits in the UK. It would be possible to carry out a robust study which uses respected methods relatively cheaply.

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