Written evidence submitted by the National Forest Company (RUT0174)

Executive summary

The National Forest Company believes that in order to increase rural tourism and the benefits this provides, the Government should:

- Provide opportunities for developing destinations such as The National Forest to ‘piggy back’ on the back of national destination marketing campaigns;
- Ensure any replacement EU Structural Investment Funds include a provision for destination marketing to support new investment in new capital tourism infrastructure and tourism product;
- Develop and implement a cross government plan for walking and outdoor recreation which recognises the need for the existing infrastructure to be properly maintained;
- Work with the tourism sector to develop a more robust and rounded funding metric that additionally measures the impact of investing in tourism in terms of its ability to help sustain existing rural community services and benefiting wider measures of sustainability including the environment;
- Take a firmer hand with LEPs in coordinating funding calls to benefit rural tourism economies that span multiple LEP boundaries;
- Reach an early decision on post Brexit rural tourism funding;
- Continue to facilitate and promote public access to woodlands;
- Commit funding for destinations to raise tourism income locally.

The National Forest Company also believes that the model established for The National Forest should be explored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for use elsewhere in England as this represents value for money in delivering regeneration whilst promoting rural tourism.

1 Introduction

1.1 The National Forest Company leads the creation of The National Forest, a new, wooded landscape for the nation across 200 square miles of central England. The National Forest Company was established by Government in April 1995. It is a charity and Non-Profit Institution within the Public Sector, sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The National Forest Company leads through working partnerships with landowners, businesses, public, private and voluntary organisations and local communities to fulfil the shared vision for the Forest. Together with our partners we:

- Support Forest creation and management to provide a resilient environment;
- Encourage activities and facilities to promote Forest related businesses, recreation and tourism;
- Engage communities in the Forest to improve wellbeing and quality of life.
1.3 The National Forest is a successful example of environmentally-led regeneration and demonstrates what can be achieved with a long-term vision and political will. The original aim to create England’s first new forest in over 1,000 years is coming of age and on the back of this, a new woodland visitor economy is emerging. Now in its 25th year, The National Forest has seen forest cover increase from an initial 6% to more than 20%, with the value of the tourism economy increasing by more than 48%. The Forest’s visitor economy now accounts for £373m of visitor spending per annum and supports 4,842 jobs. It is a national exemplar of sustainable development, highlighting restoration of a rural landscape, an economic shift from mineral extraction to leisure and recreation, and the enhancement of community well-being.

1.4 The National Forest Company welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s inquiry into rural tourism.

2 National Forest Company’s view on specific issues

2.1 The following are the views of the National Forest Company on the specific issues that the EFRA Select Committee will be addressing as part of this Inquiry.

3 Marketing

3.1 We would welcome opportunities for Government to support the marketing and development of developing or emerging rural destinations. Too much Government support goes to the ‘attack brand’ destinations on the premise that they drive international visitors. We would welcome opportunities for developing destinations, such as ourselves, to be able to ‘piggy back’ on the back of national campaigns. The previous Regional Growth Fund campaigns managed by VisitEngland, were good examples of thematic campaigns e.g. countryside and outdoor activities, where smaller rural destinations could participate on an equal footing to the larger more established destinations.

3.2 Post Brexit, we would also request that Government take a more pragmatic approach to the inclusion of destination marketing as part of any replacement EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to support rural tourism development. Previous ESIF programmes have specifically excluded destination marketing as part of a package of wider capital investment in new tourism infrastructure and tourism product. We would encourage the Government to address this imbalance and ensure that where it supports capital investment in tourism infrastructure and tourism product, it should also include an element of revenue funded destination marketing support to drive new demand. We do accept though, that any element of destination marketing support could be time limited and be tapered off after a certain amount of time.

4 Access
4.1 It is important to recognise that access and access routes can have different functions in the context of rural tourism. Visitors need to be able to get to a rural destination from surrounding cities and transport routes, get around easily once they are at a rural destination, and have opportunities for off-road access such as on trails, cycle paths and bridleways. In the context of rural initiatives such as The National Forest, sustainable transport options are important.

4.2 For a destination such as The National Forest, it is essential that visitors can easily move between its many attractions. Within the central area of the Forest (an area of extensive coalfield regeneration between Ashby de la Zouch and Swadlincote), there is currently work being undertaken to map, prioritise and promote the local network of footpaths and bridleways. This is to ensure that visitors to the area can navigate from their accommodation to the range of local woodlands, attractions and other elements of the tourism offer. This project is possible in an area like this, where there is an extensive network of paths in place.

4.3 However, in other areas of The National Forest, this provision is more fragmented. The provision of bridleways is particularly problematic, meaning that even where individual sites or woodlands have equestrian access, moving between them without a horse-box requires extensive use of roads, with the attendant dangers. Despite the National Forest Company working with local horse riders and landowners to identify potential off-road riding routes, this is still a challenging area. In some areas, there are also significant gaps in the footpath network, making walking between sites an occasionally circuitous activity.

4.4 One of the biggest challenges to rural access (and its contribution to tourism) is the ever more constrained budgets of the local authorities responsible for maintaining our Rights of Way network. We work with three County Councils whose dedicated members of staff try to manage hundreds of miles of footpaths, bridleways and byways. There are high expectations from the public, which are inevitably difficult to meet with limited resources. If additional funds cannot be found to support these teams, consideration could be given to allowing them a greater ability to prioritise those routes that provide the best value for money (e.g. those that link key assets and those that are most popular with users). This will ensure that those priority routes are kept in the best condition.

4.5 Alongside this, greater support could be given to working with local volunteers in the management of Rights of Way. In The National Forest, Derbyshire County Council has supported the establishment of a local footpath group in Overseal, which is now undertaking inspections and basic management works across the parish. The National Forest Company has now extended this approach to cover the National Forest Way long-distance walking trail. This is a model which could be explored further across rural destinations to empower local people and provide them with the necessary training and support to safely manage their local access.

4.6 In addition to the importance of access between attractions, access provision can be an attraction in its own right. In 2014, we launched the National Forest Way, a 75-
mile long-distance walking route which stretches across the whole of The National Forest. For many visitors to The National Forest, the Way has become the main reason for their visit, supporting local accommodation, visitor attractions and food and drink providers. An initial feasibility study for the Way indicated its potential to attract an additional 25,000 visitors to The National Forest per year making a significant contribution to overall tourism spending in the area. We also promote 15 additional circular walks which overlap the National Forest Way and provide opportunities for walkers to vary their walking experience and enjoy different aspects of The National Forest.

4.7 While England’s National Trails have a high profile, it is often harder for locally-generated long-distance paths to gain a national profile. A solution would be to build on the success of the National Trails to promote other long-distance walking offers. The National Trails website could include a page highlighting the other routes that are available and signpost users to the organisations that manage them. This would create a ‘one-stop-shop’ for long-distance walking in the UK. This could be linked to national campaigns to get people walking these routes either in one go, or in a number of smaller sections. We would be keen to work with other organisations to not only promote our long-distance walking offer, but also look at developing links between the different trails that allow ever-greater options for users.

5 Funding and fiscal policies

5.1 The current picture of rural tourism investment and activity across the UK is patchy. The impacts of reduced public investment in infrastructure and facilities, such as footpaths and bus services are being felt in many areas and are having a detrimental effect on the rural tourism offer and economy. We would like to see a widespread recognition of the value and potential of rural tourism across all Local Authorities and LEPs and a commensurate investment of resource and activity in destination management that could benefit businesses, communities and visitors.

5.2 LEPs must be given strong encouragement to direct investment to rural areas to maximise growth opportunities for the micro-businesses and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) who depend on tourism and can help diversify local economies. Currently funding is prioritised based on the number of jobs created, but we think this is a too overly simplistic assessment of the benefits of investing in rural tourism. We would encourage Government to work with the sector to develop a more robust and rounded metric that additionally measures the impact of investing in tourism in terms of its ability to help sustain existing rural community services and benefiting wider measures of sustainability including the environment.

5.3 The ability for the National Forest Company to bid in consortia or as a lead organisation to LEP funding streams which support The National Forest is very helpful, but all too often, we are often overlooked or excluded from such opportunities. As a destination that doesn’t conform to the usual county boundaries or LEP defined economic geographies, The National Forest has been locked out of applying for LEP funds for Forest wide visitor economy projects. This is because
none of the LEPs that cover The National Forest have coordinated funding calls at the same time to allow for cross border working. We have sought support from Defra to try and coordinate the current European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) funding calls for Tourism Cooperation that is channelled through the LEPs. However, whilst Defra colleagues understand the difficulties and challenges we face here in The National Forest to try and coordinate calls, we have been told there is nothing Defra can do to influence the timing of these calls. We would urge the Government to streamline the coordination of LEP funding calls to benefit destinations such as The National Forest whose footprint covers four LEP areas.

5.4 Post Brexit, we would encourage the Government to maintain support for the current CAP funded Rural Development Programme administered through Defra. This includes £20m specifically targeted toward rural tourism promotion, while £138m of LEADER programme funds can be accessed by rural tourism businesses and the EAFRD Growth Programme contains a further £178m that can also be accessed by rural tourism businesses. In addition, it can be argued that the £3.1bn available for environmental schemes through the Rural Development Programme enhance the rural environment making it more attractive to visitors. However, this funding is thinly spread across the country and would benefit from more targeted geographic approaches to achieve greater impact at a landscape level. We, along with many other rural tourism stakeholders, would appreciate an early review and decision on this matter to maintain continuity of funding.

6 Planning and regulation

6.1 While not designated as a protected landscape, The National Forest has shown how the planning system can be used positively to enhance the landscape and improve access to it as part of a wider initiative to create a setting for rural tourism businesses. Across The National Forest, the National Forest Company has successfully worked with the six Borough and District Authorities and three County Councils to create around 1500 hectares of new woodland and other habitats through the planning system. Innovative planning policies have been in place across these authorities since the mid-1990s ensuring that new development sites include woodlands and other habitats, which in turn connects to wider green infrastructure networks.

6.2 These policies have also ensured that these green spaces are accessible to new residents, including new signage and interpretation, and provide access to other National Forest sites in the vicinity, increasing access to woodlands both for new and existing residents and visitors. Over the past few years these innovative policies have been updated through the adoption of new Local Plans and Core Strategies which will ensure that new development within The National Forest continues to provide green infrastructure at an unprecedented scale. These planning policies are based on the requirement of new developments contributing to the Forest as set out in the table below. In exceptional circumstances, where planting cannot be accommodated to this scale within the development, the shortfall should be addressed by a
contribution towards off-site planting of £20,000 per hectare secured through a Section 106 agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development type</th>
<th>Thresholds</th>
<th>Proportion of site to be Forest green infrastructure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>between 0.5ha and 10ha</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>between 1ha and 10ha</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All development</td>
<td>Over 10ha</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3 We believe that these polices represent a national exemplar and could be replicated in similar rural areas elsewhere in the country. For further details, please see:

http://www.nationalforest.org/woodlands/woodlandcreation/development/

7 Local environment and character:

7.1 It is a bitter irony that the more successful destinations are in attracting visitors; the more pressure is put on the environment and the organisations responsible for their management. The ability to raise income locally to directly contribute to managing the Forest asset in terms of woodland management, way marking, information provision, events and marketing, etc. should be given strong consideration and we would encourage the Government to look again at local revenue generation schemes such as bed taxes or other means of mandatory contribution models to maintain investment in the Forest asset. In The National Forest we are exploring voluntary visitor contribution models that support sustainable tourism businesses to grow whilst also contributing funds towards maintenance of the assets. We would welcome Government support for these types of initiatives to accompany any mandatory contribution models.

8 Defra role

8.1 The National Forest Company believes that in order to increase rural tourism and the benefits this provides, Defra should:

- Provide opportunities for developing destinations such as The National Forest to ‘piggy back’ on the back of national destination marketing campaigns;
- Ensure any replacement EU Structural Investment Funds include a provision for destination marketing to support new investment in new capital tourism infrastructure and tourism product;
• Develop and implement a cross government plan for walking and outdoor recreation which recognises the need for the existing infrastructure to be properly maintained;
• Work with the tourism sector to develop a more robust and rounded funding metric that additionally measures the impact of investing in tourism in terms of its ability to help sustain existing rural community services and benefiting wider measures of sustainability including the environment.
• Take a firmer hand with LEPs in coordinating funding calls to benefit rural tourism economies that span multiple LEP boundaries;
• Continue to facilitate and promote public access to woodlands;
• Reach an early decision on post Brexit rural tourism funding;
• Commit funding for destinations to raise tourism income locally.

8.2 The NFC also believes that the model established for The National Forest should be explored by Defra for use elsewhere in England as this represents value for money in delivering regeneration whilst promoting rural tourism.

9 Further Information

9.1 Should you require further details or have any queries regarding this written submission, please contact Richard Drakeley at the National Forest Company on:

September 2016