Forest Holidays provides an unparalleled example of how sustainable tourism can successfully balance economic, social and environmental interests. Our purpose is to create positive experiences in Britain’s amazing forests; connecting people, nature and local communities. From our experience the most significant barrier to expanding our model relates to planning regulations.

- In our experience, there is significant demand for regional holidays within the rural areas of the UK. We find significant support for same within the NPPF in terms of the promotion of sustainable development, economic development, protection and enhancement of the environment and employment within rural communities. It would be preferable if the Framework could provide the decision maker with additional clearer guidance as to how much weight should be afforded to these benefits when considering such bespoke proposals that Forest Holidays can offer within the Green Belt and other sensitive designations.

- We would welcome a further strengthening in policy in favour of sustainable and responsible tourism as currently exists in Scotland, alongside the elaboration and further guidance in the PPG.

- Secondary to amendments to the planning system, changes would be welcomed from government agencies to better differentiate the market offerings of sustainable operators such as Forest Holidays from other more well-known large scale holiday park providers. This would support tourists in identifying and appreciating operators that support and showcase rural communities and also ensure Local Planning Authorities and members are more adequately briefed.

- Continued investment in transport and mobile communications will also increase the ability of tourist operators to function effectively.

**Introduction**

(1) Forest Holidays is a partner of the Forestry Commission, with 9 cabin holiday locations based entirely within the Public Forest Estate across the UK. Every year Forest Holidays brings approximately 200,000 tourists into rural communities. Our model operates 12 months of the year and the experience that we offer guests is informal and centred around slow tourism, with visitors encouraged to explore the local environment, local attractions, restaurants, cafes and business; supporting rural communities through their spending.

(2) Economic analysis shows that Forest Holidays’ guests spend £16 million per year with local businesses, equating to £30,000 per cabin per year. This is not seasonal income, as Forest Holidays has 93% occupancy year round* - not just during the typical holiday seasons.
(3) Our locations are situated on Forestry Commission land for which we pay rent. The rent amounts to £2 million per year and is index-linked. This arrangement gives the Forestry Commission financial security over the long term.

(4) The on-site infrastructure to support the cabins is deliberately minimal with a small cafe and shop, with produce sourced from local suppliers.

(5) Each location employs an average of 60 people, drawn from the immediate rural community. We employ, and are keen to encourage more apprentices on each of our sites.

(6) Forest Holidays was founded by the Forestry Commission in the 1970s and in the past 10 years we have seen a clear growth in demand from visitors for our product. Increasingly tourists are seeking new experiences in the heart of nature and value the freedom to explore surrounding communities. Year on year comparison with August 2015 alone shows a 4% increase on the number of nights booked.

(7) Together with the Forestry Commission, we have identified suitable opportunities for new Forest Holidays locations across the UK where we might satisfy this growing demand. We are confident that our model and values are well aligned with the Forestry Commission’s triple bottom line objectives of creating social, economic and environmental benefits and once established, are widely accepted and applauded by local communities. However, despite this success, we are experiencing significant challenges in realising these benefits and creating further opportunities for rural tourism across England.

**Planning and Regulation**

(8) For Forest Holidays, planning and regulation is the most significant barrier to extending our proven model of sustainable tourism further across England.

(9) Our experience has shown that, notwithstanding support in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for sustainable rural tourism, and despite the evidenced economic, social and environmental benefits of our model we find that this can be overlooked when determining planning applications. Consequently the time frames for obtaining consent, the financial costs and the resultant uncertainty created by planning and regulation are creating significant barriers to investment.

(10) We would welcome a further strengthening in policy in favour of sustainable and responsible tourism in rural areas and we are convinced that this would encourage more organisations to invest in bringing forward sustainable models of tourism development.

(11) All too often local authority Development Plans focus on restrictive blanket type policies on the countryside, AONB, Green Belt, etc rather than providing policies that would positively guide investment in rural tourism. In our experience these plans often direct rural tourism to specific locations adjacent to towns and main service centres, rather than the wider rural area. In addition, many policies appear to limit the size of rural tourism development to “small scale” proposals and “conversions”. On the whole these measures are considered to be overly restrictive and without any firm justification.
In the majority of cases there are no Development Plan policies with regard to cabins and chalet type development, which Forest Holidays and others deliver. Policy guidance on how to deal with cabin and chalet type developments should be implemented. At present these developments are often assessed through existing policies pertaining to the more traditional, static and touring caravan sites, which is not appropriate given the bespoke nature of this offering and its wider reaching benefits to rural communities.

In addition to the above, whilst the NPPF provides a positive strategic basis for sustainable rural based tourism, this has not been developed further in the associated Planning Practice Guidance (PPG). The only reference to tourism in the PPG is a single paragraph under the section entitled “Ensuring the vitality of town centres” and this offers little specific guidance other than broadly referencing what local planning authorities should do. There is no specific guidance with regard to rural tourism or indeed the rural economy in the PPG. This is a fundamental omission. Appropriate guidance could be developed in the PPG between the planning and tourism sectors. Visit England has developed an outline guide to planning that could form an initial basis for this (see link below).

Furthermore, in pinpointing best practice, appropriate links should be more explicitly referred to in the PPG. One example of this would be the Rural Tourism Action Plan produced by Visit England as per the link below.

https://www.visitbritain.org/tourism-planning-guidance

National Park Policy

Forest Holidays has two locations operating successfully in Scotland’s National Parks with one of these having recently been extended following the grant of planning permission in 2015.

There is clearly a disparity between the aims and priorities of National Parks in Scotland and those in England.

In the case of Scotland equal weighting is given to promote sustainable economic and social development of the area’s communities.

In England this is a secondary purpose. Forest Holidays believes that a change in emphasis to rebalance the aims in England would support sustainable tourism. We consider that this would be best achieved within PPG and this should include guidance relating to protected areas such as National Parks. Whilst recognising the special status of such areas, this guidance should emphasise that sustainable rural tourism can work in harmony in such areas, as the Forest Holidays product demonstrates, as well as delivering significant economic benefits where such activity is more limited.

Marketing
Our mission is to keep the forest and local character at the heart of what we do, providing an unpackaged tourism experience focused on wellbeing.

Yet we currently face a significant challenge in differentiating the understanding of our offering both by visitors and other stakeholders. Frequently we are bracketed in the same category as other, more well-known, large scale holiday park providers. The incorrectly applied preconception is one of a packaged and gated location with heavy infrastructure and where visitor spend is harnessed within the park.

In fact we offer the opposite; we are entirely open to the public, with no barriers, limited infrastructure and a marketed product which promotes slow tourism and encourages visitors to explore the unique attractions of each area.

We would welcome a greater concentration by government agencies to clearly define products and better segment the market. This would support tourists in identifying and appreciating operators that support and showcase rural communities. It would also promote a better understanding of sustainable tourism models to local communities and stakeholders in new locations.

At Forest Holidays we have relationships with local tourism boards across the country. Although we operate good working relationships with each of these organisations, the relationship terms and service we receive varies considerably, much due to varying membership fees and service arrangements. This makes it challenging to work with these bodies in a consistent way and can restrict the time spent on beneficial activity.

Infrastructure and Skills

Recruitment in a rural location is an ongoing challenge primarily due to transportation issues and housing costs. We have a series of internal training programmes which support career progression, including NVQ courses. We employ, and are keen to encourage, more apprentices with the right attitude and aptitude to build a career with us. Our apprentices are paid well, as they are expected to do a “real job” in addition to their formal training.

Transportation issues and regularity of public transport impact on staff being able to get to work. To assist staff in getting to and from work, Forest Holidays puts on mini-buses in some of our locations.

Whilst we are in a position to act as a catalyst for broadband to a section of the community who may be deprived of this, broader investment into broadband and mobile communications would enhance our ability to recruit and retain talented staff and operate our sites effectively.

Transportation and connectivity across rural locations can also pose a problem in attracting visitors, particularly those from overseas. With the remoteness of our locations, it is generally accepted that most visitors will be arriving by car, as public transport is in short and infrequent supply. However, because of the flexible arrival and departure times and the irregular booking periods there is no daily or weekly peak arrival or departure times for traffic to and from Forest Holidays’ sites and little impact on the local highway network.
Conclusion

(28) The demand for holidays that give people the opportunity to explore rural England is growing. Once established, Forest Holidays locations are widely accepted and applauded by local communities and with numerous tourism awards to our name, we have a proven model that works for visitors, for local economies and for the environment. As a priority, we would welcome the adjustment of planning regulation and policy to favour sustainable development and the better alignment and coordination between the tourism and planning sectors.

(29) Our many years of experience and success in bringing sustainable tourism into rural areas makes Forest Holidays an excellent case study, which demonstrates that the right kind of high quality sustainable rural tourism can be a positive asset to the country.

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