A submission of evidence to the EFRA Select Committee by the British Mountaineering Council (BMC). The BMC is the representative body for climbers, hill walkers and mountaineers in England and Wales with over 80,000 members participating in a range of activities in our natural environment.

The BMC has been actively involved in managing access to our mountains, cliffs and crags for over 30 years and we have worked closely and successfully with many conservation organisations as well as public and private landowners to ensure access opportunities are provided for at the same time as educating the public on the unique features of the environment we use and enjoy.

We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee on rural tourism in England. Our evidence is focussed on changes required to current Government policies that we believe are needed in order to enable more people to access and explore our rural areas through outdoor recreation.

Executive Summary

- Better promotion of the whole suite of recreational opportunities rural destinations offer is needed to help support tourism. The Sport England report ‘Getting Active Outdoors’ (2015) indicates that 18.2 million people are currently not active outdoors but want to be within the next 12 months;
- Better funding and political will to enable greater access to our coast and countryside is also needed. In particular, investment in our existing rights of way and open access network;
- Greater understanding and awareness of where people can go in the countryside and what they can do will help improve the number of people visiting and exploring our countryside;
- The planning system should remain plan led to ensure planning delivers environmental and social goals alongside economic growth. Government must show stronger commitment to protect the Green Belt, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
- Existing good practices should be drawn upon to ensure national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character;
- Defra should take a key role in supporting and championing rural tourism as the body responsible for the natural environment and the laws governing access to it.
Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should the Government do to support this work?

1. **Outdoor recreation should form a greater part of the promotion to rural destinations** -
   the BMC believes that more thought and reference should be given to the whole suite of recreational opportunities rural destinations offer - it isn’t simply about historical villages, stately homes and walking holidays but about promoting more adventurous recreational opportunities such as climbing, mountaineering and bouldering. For example, across rural areas of England and Wales, there are over 3000 natural climbing crags and over 170 climbing sites along the English coast. Alongside the 13 National Parks in England and Wales and the network of paths, national trails and open spaces, there are also ample opportunities to explore the British countryside, coast and rural areas, including 865,000 hectares of open access land (mountain, moor, heath, down land and registered common land) but very often these do not feature in the promotion of areas.

2. **Climbing, hill walking and other outdoor activities make a substantial contribution to rural economies; this contribution could be further increased with greater participation and better publicity of opportunities for engagement in outdoor activities.**

3. **Currently agencies such as Visit England do little to promote these wider recreational opportunities and are not working in partnership with representative user bodies such as the BMC to promote events such as climbing and walking festivals that are open to everyone: there is more that Tourist Boards could do to understand the sector.**

4. **Greater awareness & dialogue of access & recreational opportunities among existing forums and partnerships** - it is important to ensure that there is good communication between Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Local Authorities and Local Action Groups (LEADER) and the swathe of potential outdoor projects is made clear to all partnerships. Defra could encourage joint working between these partnerships as well as appropriate outdoor bodies to maximise rural tourism.

5. **More publicity should be made of LEADER and what it has achieved to date. Very little is known of the approach and increased interest may draw in new expertise, interest and potential new rural projects.**

6. **It is essential that organisations like the BMC, who are working on the ground and who have a large volunteer base, are able to impart our experience and knowledge on issues around recreation and tourism. Each Local Action Group should have access to a number of external stakeholders and contacts and be encouraged to develop**
partnership projects around tourism.

7. Local authorities (particularly those in rural areas) should be encouraged to produce a robust and comprehensive strategy for physical activity opportunities in response to local needs and to fully utilise local outdoor and indoor facilities. There is also a role for County Sports Partnerships (CSPs) in bringing together local partners to deliver new opportunities; schools (including private schools) should be encouraged to open their facilities to local communities, particularly in rural areas.

8. **Invest in a substantial long term high profile mainstream TV and social media campaign** - on the back of the This Girl Can Campaign, a further Government Campaign looking at getting more visitors into rural areas and experiencing activities such as hill walking, climbing, orienteering and mountaineering could help increase interest in outdoor recreation.

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

9. Economic activity relating to tourism is dependent on both the maintenance of high quality natural assets, and on the provision of means by which the public can access these assets. These include our public rights of way network, areas of open access land, National Parks, National Trails and other publicly accessible green space. Significant improvements are also needed to public transport, especially rural bus services and rail links, to ensure that people can access these areas without having to rely on a car. For tourism to happen, we need both wonderful places to visit and the means to do so.

10. **Better funding and political will to enable access to our coast and countryside** - England’s recreational access infrastructure – public rights of way, open access land and other green spaces - enable people to reconnect with nature, exercise, watch wildlife, revisit history or explore rural towns and villages. There is a clear need to effectively support land managers to maintain and enhance recreational access, and to provide opportunities for business diversification around recreation and tourism.

11. Public access and recreation must continue to be an essential component of Government policy. Austerity measures have had a significant impact on the ability of local Government (highway authorities and access authorities) to undertake their statutory requirement to maintain access infrastructure and open access land - nearly 70% of highway authorities have cut their rights of way budgets over the period 2009–12.
12. Private, voluntary or local community bodies cannot secure grant funding for the maintenance of (for example) PROW as it remains a statutory duty of the Local Highways Authority. Funding can however, be won for capital projects for physical access improvements (i.e. beyond the statutory minimum) but not for maintaining what already exists. Government should address this imbalance.

13. It is a statutory requirement for Government to implement the coastal access rights under Part 9 of the MCAA around the whole of the English coast. The current Government must continue to fully support the roll-out of the England Coast Path and associated margin of land.

14. **More opportunities for funding of access with existing streams** - access and recreation could be better prioritised through existing funding mechanisms such as LEPs, Community Benefit Funds and through future schemes under the Common Agricultural Policy or a UK Agricultural policy. For example, greater financial support could be made available for land managers and communities to both complement the statutory opportunities already available (exceeding any basic legal requirements) and, at the least, be available to help finance access capital items to support the provision of access and/or to help support improvements to existing access. LEPs & other business orientated forums should build closer relationships with outdoor organisations to ensure the outdoors is effectively represented in order to help steer money where it could have a positive effect and where there is a clear demand.

15. Support for recreation and tourism should be designed to ensure the public gets maximum value for money and long lasting economic benefits from public subsidies. Investing in existing rights of way and the open access network for example, could provide more public benefit than providing new routes, particularly as budget cuts impact on existing access.

16. There is good evidence that clear, easy to use, well-promoted path and trail networks influence more people to make day trips to an area or stay for longer periods – thereby increasing visitor spend.

17. **Greater understanding and awareness of where people can go in the countryside and what they can do** - there is a lack of understanding among the general public (as well as politicians) as to the legislation governing where people can go and what they can do, their rights and responsibilities, and where to access this type of information. This includes the package of rights under the Countryside and Rights of way Act 2000 (CROW), the Marine & Coastal Access Act 2006 as well as the Countryside Code.
18. For example, the new coastal access rights are currently being marketed as the ‘All England Coast Path’ but they in fact offer much more than a footpath– land on the seaward side of the path automatically becomes coastal margin; this margin means that climbers have the right to access sea cliffs for climbing in perpetuity. In total, there are 169 climbing sites along the English coast which carry between them some 11,000 rock climbing routes. Very little has been done to promote understanding of these new rights (beyond walking) and the recreational / tourist opportunities they present.

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?

19. The planning system should remain plan led to ensure planning delivers environmental and social goals alongside economic growth. The Government must show stronger commitment to protect the Green Belt, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

20. Government should also invest in sustainable public transport infrastructure that provides people with easy access to outdoor recreation opportunities, especially in rural areas.

Local environment and character: How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

21. **Draw on existing good practice** - the quality of the environment and ease of access to it, are primary drivers for our local economy. A number of good practises already exist and these should be drawn upon.

22. The BMC has been actively involved in managing access to our mountains, cliffs and crags for over 30 years and we have worked closely and successfully with many conservation organisations as well as public and private landowners to ensure access opportunities are provided for at the same time as educating the public on the unique features of the environment we use and enjoy. The BMC is committed to supporting access and conservation for the mutual benefit of both.

23. The least restrictive option as set out under CROW and championed by Natural England (NE) is a key approach to protecting the natural environment whilst at the same time ensuring that the public have a right to access and understand it. There are numerous examples of successful access and conservation management techniques based on this approach such as seasonal climbing restrictions to protect nesting birds and agreed codes of good practice in some areas to protect rare plant communities (e.g. Holwick Scar, Upper Teesdale). The BMC has been working closely with NE and
other conservation organisations to agree seasonal access restrictions over the last 20 years.

**Defra role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do to ensure government departments support rural tourism?**

24. **Cross-departmental working** – it is essential for Defra to work closely with other Government departments in order to ensure that their work supports rural tourism and outdoor recreation. The BMC believes that Defra should take a key role in supporting rural tourism as the body responsible for the natural environment and the laws governing access to it – access to the outdoors being essential to participation. Defra is currently developing its 25-year strategy. We hope that this will align with the aims of the DCMS sport strategy and that outdoor recreation will be prioritised within this.

25. The cross-department group on physical activity is a good example of how joined up working is being delivered in practice and along with recent publications such as ‘Moving More Living More, Tackling Physical Inactivity - A Coordinated Approach’ and the ‘Everybody Active Every Day’ framework, Government is clearly progressing well in this area. However, we feel there is still a long way to go. It is essential that realistic plans are put in place to integrate the various departments and sectors involved. Defra (and Natural England) have an important role to play and it will be essential that they have a seat on the newly formed Tourism Industry Council.

*September 2016*