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Executive Summary

The most important ways in which Government Departments can help and support rural tourism are:

1. Get macro-economic and policy issues right as these have a much greater influence on tourism than tinkering with micro-issues;
2. Ensure that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) does not result in rapid and irreversible changes to farming and the landscape it supports;
3. Ensure that all rural businesses operate on a level playing field with regard to planning and building regulations;
4. Review legislation to ensure that extant laws are appropriate to the significantly increased intensity of modern-day use of public paths, beaches and access land, especially with regard to dogs;
5. Ensure that rural businesses have the same access to essential services (including superfast broadband) and on similar terms to those in urban areas, regardless of location;
6. Address the artificial seasonal peak-loading caused by the clampdown on term-time holidays;
7. Ensure Departments have a better understanding of how the rural tourism sector operates and a better awareness of how their actions may impact on tourism in ways which might not be immediately apparent.

Introduction and Background

Arguably the single most beneficial thing DEFRA and other Government Departments can do to support and enhance rural tourism is “not stuff-up”.

This simple exhortation may seem flippant, but history shows that the biggest impacts on rural tourism in recent decades, both positive and negative, have been macro rather than micro in nature, whether economic or political. As far back as the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak and the measures taken to control it, it has been evident how
severely policy failures at a national level can impact on rural communities, rural tourism and public perceptions of the English countryside.

But, it is not only events and policies specifically related to rural areas in England that impact on rural tourism. National and international economic circumstances are also key factors. The health of the national economy, especially households’ disposable income and feelings about job security affect decisions on whether to holiday at all, whilst exchange rate fluctuations can cause significant swings in trends for English tourists to holiday abroad or for foreign visitors to come to the UK. By way of example, the economic crash of 2008 and the fall of Sterling against the Euro resulted in a substantial growth in so-called “staycations” with UK holiday makers deciding to take domestic holidays rather than travel abroad. This certainly benefited many English tourist destinations for several summers after the crash, but for some, the mismanagement of the 2012 Olympics, put a swift and brutal end to those benefits.

If ever proof were needed of the power of advertising, the relentless campaign on road signs, rail announcements and in the media, warning visitors for months prior to the 2012 Olympics of impending congestion was hugely successful. It kept regular and non-Olympic visitors away from areas such as Weymouth and Portland, but was appalling at encouraging any visitors at all to holiday in the area whether for the Olympic sailing events or any other reason. The result was the bizarre sight of one of England’s most popular beaches deserted during the peak weeks of the summer season with minimal replacement spectator footfall for what, even with the most optimistic of outlooks, has never been a spectator sport. Facilities and events that had been planned to cater to spectators that never materialised were underutilised by a huge margin, with some failing financially within the first two days. The consequential impacts of this catastrophic policy and marketing miscalculation were felt by many rural tourism businesses and accommodation providers in surrounding rural areas. Recovery from that loss of trade and revenue has been a slow process – once lost to other destinations, rebuilding an area’s customer base can be a slow and costly process.

Similar effects can result from flooding and other natural disasters. Whilst the immediate impacts of such events can be catastrophic for individuals and some businesses, they are often fairly localised. However, this is seldom recognised in media coverage and therefore often misunderstood in public perception. Consequently, Ministers and Officials being interviewed at the scene of the worst of the devastation can result in a perception amongst would-be visitors to a region that the whole area is affected and unsuitable to visit. At the time of the of the very localised but devastating flooding in Boscastle, Cornwall, in 2004, it was not uncommon for tourism providers in other parts of the South West to be asked by potential customers how they were coping with, or whether they were affected by, the flooding.

This illustrates very clearly something that is at the crux of the Committee’s inquiry, namely that whilst tourists trade with individual businesses, for the most part, what they come to
visit is a locality – and that is as true in rural areas as it is of those that are urban and metropolitan.

But whilst tourists may choose to visit a city because of its historic or cultural “offer”, for the most part they visit rural areas for their scenic, aesthetic and amenity value. To a large extent, given the small footprint of most tourism businesses compared to the entirety of the landscape in which they are located, this means that rural tourism businesses “piggy-back” on whatever accounts for the majority of land use (and therefore landscape maintenance) in any given area. In most of rural England that land use is agricultural. In many regions of the country, this means that tourism is supported by the vestiges of farming systems and landscape features (e.g. field boundaries and traditional buildings) which have developed through farming practices over the last few centuries, but which have seen dramatic changes since the Second World War and have subsequently been moulded by the UK’s involvement with the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). How the UK disengages itself from the CAP will be pivotal, not just for how agriculture in England fares in coming decades, but also to what the English landscape looks like and consequently just how appealing it may be to visitors domestic or foreign.

Whilst Britain’s vote to exit the European Union appears to have had a positive impact on numbers of foreign visitors in the short-term, because of the fall of Sterling making the UK more attractive as a destination for EU travellers, it is not yet clear what structural changes will occur in farming in England in the medium to long term. It seems highly unlikely that English farms will be able to compete with truly global competitors without rapid and substantial changes in the scale of their operations and a drive for further efficiencies. This will have major impacts not just on the number of farms, farm workers and the type and mix of crops and animals farmed in England, but also on the landscape they support. Given the vote to leave the EU (and therefore the CAP with all that it represents in terms of outlets for English products and protection from the worst of the vagaries of global commodity prices) it seems inevitable that England’s landscape will change. Whether that landscape is more or less appealing to tourists of any nationality will depend largely on what those, as yet undetermined, changes might be. They have the potential to cause the biggest and most rapid reshaping of the English countryside in the last 50 to 100 years.

In this context, the best way in which the UK Government, DEFRA and other Departments can support rural tourism is to get the core of their “day job” right, by building consumer confidence through a strong and resilient economy in which people feel secure in their jobs and have disposable incomes to spend on holidays. They also need to develop a policy framework for farming which somehow balances the needs for a more efficient and globally competitive agricultural industry with the public’s perception of, and tourists’ desires for, an English landscape which was originally shaped by farming practices and structures which are now out of date. It remains to be seen whether a UK farming industry expected to compete with the huge scale grain growers and meat producers of the Americas or Australasia, for example, will foster a landscape as appealing to English or European eyes as that which has developed within the protective shell of a common European policy for food and agriculture
intended to cater for production in considerably smaller, less efficient farms across a very different suite of European landscapes.

Compared to these big issues of economic stability, international currency fluctuations and the future shape of the English rural landscape, other policy issues are comparatively minor actors on the future prospects for rural tourism. Clearly they will and do play a part, but if Government gets the big issues wrong, that part may be limited to providing something for the “stewards” to re-arrange whilst the Titanic heads to the bottom.

Taking each of the Committee’s questions in turn:

**Marketing**

Should it be the role of DEFRA or its agencies to promote rural destinations and are these the organisations best placed to determine priorities and key messages to be promoted? It seems more likely that this function is best left to individual businesses and the plethora of other regional and local organisations already active in this field. No doubt further funding would be welcome, but given past Governmental failures in this area, it might be best if any future direct involvement domestically was limited. There might be a stronger argument for campaigns run internationally to promote rural England as a holiday destination. But the question then will be where to target such promotion in order to elicit sufficient mass engagement to make any material difference – logic and simple logistics suggests that our near-neighbours in Northern Europe are more likely to prove regular and repeat customers for UK rural tourism than those from more distant shores.

**Access**

Access to the countryside and coast in most parts of England is already good with an extensive mix of footpaths, bridleways and Countryside and Coastal “Access Land”. However, growth in use of this existing access provision in some areas results in increasing conflicts and tensions between:

- different user groups (e.g. cyclists and walkers);
- the needs of landscape and wildlife conservation and the pressures of increased visitor numbers and footfall;
- the lawful activity of farmers and landowners and increasing use by dog owners (often off leads).

Aspects of legislation, much of it now quite dated, may need revision to ensure existing laws are adequate to cope with modern situations and levels of use. For example there is an assumption among some dog owners that their animal has a right to roam freely. A simple requirement for dogs to be on a lead when using public paths and beaches would have benefits with regard to fouling, dog attacks, livestock worrying and to the number of emergency service hours devoted to retrieving dogs from cliffs and the sea.

**Funding and Fiscal Policies**
There is little evidence to suggest that there is a shortage of tourist businesses or provision in rural areas. On the contrary, most, if not all rural tourism enterprises, especially those which operate outside of the main school holidays, operate at low levels of occupancy/footfall for much of the year. In this sense, provision already substantially exceeds economic demand, as evidenced by the substantial out of season discounts and promotions offered by many service providers. Simply throwing public cash at new enterprises could exacerbate that problem and there is limited evidence, except with rare exceptions (e.g. the Eden Project), that a “build it and they will come” approach to tourism works. A more logical approach, assuming any public funds are available at all, would be to direct funding and policy towards upgrading and enhancing the existing facilities and attractions. At the most basic level, the provision of Public Toilet facilities in some areas is at best poor and can act as a considerable disincentive to visiting tourists, especially those with children or disabilities.

Planning and Regulation

Planning and Regulation with respect to rural tourism needs to operate more fairly and rationally. In particular there is often a tendency for planners and planning policy to assume that past activity in rural areas is an indication of future need. Planning needs to take more realistic account of changing structures in agriculture (which may be an accelerated process following the EU Referendum). Given that old farm buildings and field structures etc. form an integral part of the landscape many tourists come to see, if they are to remain part of that landscape and not fall into complete disrepair, new uses will need to be found for them and permitted within them. Such use is unlikely to be for any purpose related to modern agriculture and so that process will require careful consideration and management to ensure developments within old buildings enhance and preserve features that are considered desirable or aesthetically pleasing.

The whole subject of “Permitted Development” is also in need of revision, especially as it relates to 28 day usage. As matters stand, it is possible for activities and developments which would be completely prohibited under Local Plans, and which would not receive planning consent, to be undertaken on a large scale for a fixed period on an annual basis in perpetuity, making planning law look asinine. In some circumstances, this can allow substantial temporary developments, with consequent impacts on visual amenity, which would not otherwise be permitted. This situation is, perhaps, at its most perverse in the context of 28 campsites. Camping is a tourism market for which the greatest demand is only during the main weeks of summer, but whilst licensed parks which have gone through the planning process are regulated and controlled with compliance costs to match, 28 day sites, which essentially are competing for the same core market operate free of licence restrictions and planning conditions and the costs they incur. The net effect of this contradiction is that is possible to operate large 28 day campsites in areas that would not receive permission for a licensed site, in a manner and to an extent that licensed sites would never be permitted to operate under. It also means that temporary structures and accommodations can be used which are unencumbered by the requirements of building
regulations. This is also true, in some circumstances, of so-called “glamping” accommodation, which by virtue of being “temporary” structures may be exempt from building regulations despite being rented out on a regular and systematic basis. It is hard to envisage hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation enjoying similar exemptions.

**Infrastructure and Skills**

Tourism jobs are often seasonal in nature, in part due to the UK climate, but increasingly due to the Government’s crackdown on term-time holidays, which essentially limits family holidays to the school calendar. The result is a massive, and in many respects artificial and state-regulated, peak in demand for family holidays. This seasonality impacts on the demand for staff, with large peaks and troughs, but also limits the times when permanent staff can take holidays with their own families – any key worker in a tourism business would find it practically impossible to take time off for a family holiday during their own busiest times – i.e. the school holidays. No one would deny the importance of school attendance, but state policies which value that to the exclusion of holidays spent with family may be on shaky territory both legally and morally.

Infrastructure is frequently an issue for rural businesses, but additional tourist visitors increases the loading on roads, water supply, electricity and telecoms, especially and increasingly, broadband internet. Often the costs of enhancing provision in these services falls on the business owner and this can be a brake on business development as funds which could be devoted to other improvements have to be spent on essential basic services. For example an accommodation provider in an urban area may have ready access to fibre broadband to service guests’ demand for fast internet, those in rural areas may have to pay substantial additional costs to secure any service at all.

**Local Environment and Character**

As stated previously, in rural settings this will be largely determined by the natural landscape and how it has been shaped by agriculture. As agriculture changes it can be expected that, to a greater or lesser extent, the character of the landscape and environment will also change. If the objective of Government is to retain that character and environment against a changing tide in the economic imperatives in agriculture, it may find itself with a growing bill to compensate farmers to keep the current landscape, or a need for increased regulation to prevent it from being changed through economic necessity. Any such regulation could, of itself, have an impact on the capacity of English agriculture to compete in a truly global market.

**What should DEFRA and other Departments do?**

- Make sure they get the macro-economic and policy issues right;
- Ensure rural businesses have the same access to essential infrastructure as those in urban areas – regardless of location;
• Ensure that all businesses in rural areas operate under the same rules (and therefore costs) when it comes to planning and building regulations;
• Make sure that, when responding to crises in the countryside and natural “disasters” that a proper sense of proportion is maintained with regard to how widespread the impacts might be and also that the potential impacts of Departmental actions and statements on tourism in a much wider context are considered.

In conclusion, at the moment, Government, as a whole, does not seem to understand the often complex interactions between rural areas and rural tourism, a case in point would be the launching of a major inquiry on rural tourism during the busiest time of year for those engaged in rural tourism!

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