Written evidence submitted by the North Pennines AONB Partnership (RUT0182)

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your inquiry into rural tourism in England. Please find attached, as Appendix 1, the response of the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership.

The designation of the North Pennines AONB was confirmed in 1988 and at 1,983 km², it is the second largest of the 38 AONBs in England and Wales. Each AONB has an organisation responsible for conserving and enhancing it directly, and co-ordinating the work of many partners. Locally this is the North Pennines AONB Partnership. The Partnership is made up of 23 statutory agencies, local authorities and voluntary/community organisations which care for the North Pennines. The work of the Partnership (and its Staff Unit) is guided by the statutory North Pennines AONB Management Plan, covering the period 2014-19.

Appendix 1: North Pennines AONB Partnership’s response – EFRA Select Committee Inquiry into Rural Tourism, July 2016

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

1. Rural tourism accounts for a small share of overall tourism volume (both domestic and international). There is the potential to attract more visitors to rural areas (especially overnights) to the benefit of local economies and communities.

2. Cuts in public funding for campaigns at local, regional and national levels have resulted in marketing effort heavily favouring large urban destinations and the large players i.e. those with the deepest pockets. The North Pennines is a typical rural destination in that it has a large number of small players spread over a wide geographical area. Furthermore the area straddles parts of 3 counties, two districts and two regions – which further complicates the identity, profile, branding and funding landscape.

3. The North Pennines has lots of small tourism businesses and attractions spread over almost 2,000km² (86% employ five people or less and 42% are 1-person enterprises). Taken together with the outstanding outdoor activity offer (walking, cycling, nature watching, stargazing etc.) this represents a substantial and compelling offer. However the lack of a single iconic attraction, the large number of
small players, and the fractured identity means that the significance, value and potential of the North Pennines as a 'natural destination' is often not recognised.

4. Government policy is to encourage tourists to visit England outside of the honeypots of London (and other cities). Despite the well-received Countryside is GREAT campaign the overwhelming focus of in-bound marketing is still on London and other urban/large-scale rural attractions. There is a need for marketing effort to be re-focussed on our rural destinations epitomised by the AONBs and the National Parks. There is a real opportunity to build awareness of the offer of these fantastic landscapes for visitors (domestic and international) who are looking for a countryside-based experience/holiday. Such a focus would be a win-win scenario for Government and rural businesses located in our finest landscapes.

5. The North Pennines is fortunate in that there are still three county-based Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) which cover the area (Northumberland Tourism, Visit County Durham, Cumbria Tourism). These organisations provide a measure of valuable profile for the North Pennines within their marketing and destination management activity. However each DMO refers to the North Pennines destination in a different way and has a differing level of commitment depending on priorities elsewhere within their areas – this can lead to a patchy, sometimes fractured identity for the tourism economy of the area.

6. Due to the administrative complexity of the North Pennines there is a lack of understanding of the visitor economy and its value in the area. This is because data is not collected, or expressed, for the North Pennines as a destination. This fragmentary approach hinders responsible development of the AONB’s tourism assets. A better baseline could underpin a development rationale and approach to better utilise the protected landscape’s natural assets.

7. Increasingly a thematic, campaign-based approach is being adopted due to economic imperatives in-destination, especially the need to attract match funding. This is potentially problematic if carried out in the absence of a broader-based destination marketing bedrock – which would build longer-term brand recognition for the North Pennines, as an emerging destination.

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

8. The outdoor recreation-based tourism offer of the North Pennines is underpinned by our Public Rights of Way Network (PROW). In many cases we have an excellent network of national (e.g. the Pennine Way) and regional routes (e.g. Teesdale Way), as well as a good network of footpaths and bridleways and other locally promoted
routes. There is a critical need for adequate funding to maintain (and in some cases enhance e.g. replacement of difficult stiles with gates) what we already have. In addition funding for new routes based on existing PROWs can breathe new life and impetus into the rural product (in some cases linking protected landscapes through the development of themed trails). The 15 National Trails and investment in the wider PROW Network has seen a sustained reduction in funding over the recent past – ultimately this will impact negatively on quality and hence visitor experience.

9. The detail of access legislation (including open access) and rights is a very complicated area and there is consequently a need to simplify the message for visitors (domestic and especially international). A element of this is a need for better entry-level short walks etc. and a need to have confidence in their availability and associated services. There is, perhaps, a need to review the current access arrangements in England – seeking to learn from the Scottish model and recent Welsh developments including the right to wild camp. Signage of routes is a particular need to encourage responsible usage.

10. The vast majority of visitors (9 out of 10) to the North Pennines arrive to the destination in private cars and the majority of in-destination journeys are also made by private cars. There is very poor public transport connectivity in the area (especially over the county boundaries) which hinders the promotion of car-free days. This emphasis on car access (due to a lack of alternatives) is a particular disincentive for low income groups. The impact of leisure traffic on rural destinations is likely to be the largest environmental impact of tourism – through localised congestion and car parking problems, climate change and pollution dis-benefits, loss of tranquillity and collisions with livestock and wildlife. A concerted effort to manage these impacts and provide alternatives is likely to become an increasing need as the resources available to Local Authority transport departments are further squeezed. Where train links are in place there should be connections to onward bus travel integrated in timetabling.

11. Better maintenance and promotion of existing connectivity is needed. Gap analysis to identify missed opportunities and investment in the creation of shared use routes would be beneficial. Such an approach is likely to improve health and wellbeing as well as have a positive impact on the environmental impacts of rural car use.

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?

12. The current funding streams available to support rural tourism typically require 50% (or more) match funding from the private sector. As the majority of tourism businesses in the North Pennines are micro-businesses with minimal access to
capital their ability (and willingness to shoulder the financial risk) to capitalise on these opportunities is extremely limited. In the absence of a large private-sector concern the destination inevitably misses out to urban-based destinations.

13. Grants systems can be too complicated for small businesses and start-ups to successfully navigate. There needs to be appropriately designed business support to meet the needs of the sector in this regard. BREXIT may provide an opportunity to streamline the bureaucracy of future funding to support rural tourism.

14. Project funding has tended to fund product development and infrastructure improvement and capital investment. The missing element is often the funding of marketing and promotional activity – which is necessary to underpin the capital investment.

15. The impact of Online Travel Agents (OTAs) is an interesting one in rural destinations. On the one hand they offer access to a larger market for small rural enterprises, with limited marketing reach, but on the other the high commission rates charged eats into already tight profit margins. Also, unlike local DMOs, OTAs contribute nothing towards destination development and promotion. There is a need to find a taxation mechanism to redress this imbalance and support for small businesses to help manage relationships could also be beneficial.

16. There is a need to develop grant systems which are designed specifically to help the way that rural tourism is structured and organised. Small grants to encourage new product and business start-ups, incorporating market testing, could provide the impetus for new rural entrepreneurs to ‘give it a go’. Zones specifically designed to develop enterprise that might develop into clusters of rural food, art, attractions, accommodation and associated services could really promote a step change in rural destinations. Such zones could incorporate elements of business advice, grants, long-term support, fiscal incentives, rural understanding, integration with local community needs to provide a ‘wraparound’ system of support with sustainability at its core.

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?

17. The planning system must ensure that our protected landscapes (AONBs and National Parks) are conserved and enhanced into the future. If, over time, incremental inappropriate development erodes their special character then gradually tourists will stop visiting and hence not provide an important input into rural economies. At the same time the countryside should not be preserved ‘in aspic’
– there is a need to positively develop in a way that is in support of the area’s natural beauty. Regulation and planning needs to encourage an entrepreneurial spirit which identifies opportunity and provides the appropriate advice-based services designed to inform and inspire.

18. Planning applications are assessed individually – there is a need to understand the cumulative effects of development in a given area e.g. habitat loss, traffic, light/noise pollution, loss of tranquillity. There also needs to be an understanding of the long term impact on landscape and rural character i.e. will generations in 100+ years time still benefit from the character of the North Pennines and will our landscapes still be capable of providing the services which we enjoy today?

Infrastructure and skills
What measures are needed to ensure transport, housing and other infrastructure meets visitor needs? How can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?

19. Mobile coverage (especially data) and broadband provision in the North Pennines and in many other rural destinations is patchy at best, and absent at worst. Increasingly it is critical for many visitors to access online information in-destination (e.g. attraction opening times, event information) and crucial for rural businesses to operate in an increasingly digital world.

20. The increasing pressure on local authority budgets threatens the very backdrop against which rural tourism businesses operate e.g. footpath maintenance, rural bus services, public toilet provision, litter picking, investment in public realm, road maintenance. Decreasing investment will inevitably impact on provision and will ultimately impinge on quality of experience. There needs to be a wider understanding of the role that these forms of destination management have on the profitability of tourism-based enterprises. There is truth in the Responsible Tourism adage ‘making better places for people to live in and for people to visit’.

21. The profile of a career in rural tourism needs to be raised so that it is perceived as a positive choice. To support this training provision needs to be improved to develop an appropriate career structure to foster the rural tourism business owners of the future.

Local environment and character
How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?
22. There needs to be a clear priority for landscape designations within national and local policies. Permitted development should only be allowed in protected landscapes where it won’t impact on landscape quality or natural beauty.

23. The special qualities of the North Pennines are at the heart of the area’s tourism offer – its nature, stunning landscapes, dark skies and cultural heritage. These qualities also play a central role in the quality of life for local people. Sustaining rural tourism in the North Pennines is predicated upon making sure this distinctive sense of place is maintained and enhanced into the future. It is important that development for tourism (and other types of development) does not erode these natural and cultural assets. Therefore development and associated infrastructure (e.g. roads) needs to be carefully planned to take into consideration possible detrimental impacts.

24. New development is essential in order to support the prosperity and sustainability of local communities, but great care must be taken to ensure that development is in keeping with the character of the local landscape in nature, scale and location and is of the highest quality design. This does not mean that everything must be kept looking ‘old’ – there is space for new and bold design, where this complements, and where possible add to, its setting. The start point for approaching new development which meets community/business need (including major development if it is in the national interest) should be to ask how it can be successfully accommodated, not how it can be opposed.

**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?*

25. Tourism cuts across a variety of Government portfolios and therefore a joined up approach is needed across Government Departments. Defra should be strongly advocating the benefits that tourism brings to rural communities and involved in the continuation of mechanisms of support for the sector. Defra is well placed to ensure that other Departments are aware of the role that rural tourism can play in the wider English offer and to make sure that cross-cutting policy is supportive of, and nurtures, future sustainable development.

26. Defra should champion the crucial position that AONBs and National Parks (as our Protected Landscape family) occupy with regard to England’s rural tourism offer. In addition Government policies for rural tourism should recognise the important role
that AONBs play in the development of responsibility for making tourism more sustainable.

27. Innovative transport solutions are needed. There is an opportunity to reduce regulation and the difficulty of implementing services aimed at local communities and visitors.

28. There needs to be a more flexible approach to delivery, rural support and funding to encourage diversity and innovation in business start ups.

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