1. Summary

1.1. The Woodland Trust (The Trust) is the UK's leading woodland conservation charity. Our vision is of a UK rich in native woods and trees, enjoyed and valued by everyone. We own and manage over 1,000 sites and have over 500,000 members and supporters across the UK.

1.2. The Trust welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry. We note that leaving the European Union and the loss of the Common Agricultural Policy raise issues about whether, if money is to continue to be targeted towards rural areas, it should be directed at agriculture, which adds 2% Gross value added (GVA) to the rural economy in England, or tourism, which adds 17% GV. Across the UK, tourism is responsible for 12.6% of rural employment.

1.3. The Woodland Trust feels this is an opportunity to give proper recognition in public policy of the benefits of trees and woods to human health and wellbeing, and supports efforts to improve sustainable access to the countryside. We are pleased to see that the Inquiry's terms of reference highlight the 'need to preserve the environment and the character of local communities’ but feel that strong safeguards will be needed to ensure any growth in tourism does not impact adversely on ancient woodland and other irreplaceable landscapes.

1.4. We have addressed only those questions that relate to these areas and fall within the Trust’s charitable aims.

2. Health

**Q. 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?**

2.1. We would strongly encourage Defra to work in an integrated way with the Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government in order to properly understand the significant human health benefits of natural greenspaces, and how these can be factored into public policy and decision making affecting land use.

2.2. Increasingly, the benefits of outdoor access for both physical health and mental well-being are recognised. Encouraging people to be physically active in natural green space could deliver considerable cost savings for the health service.

2.3. In terms of physical activity, contact with the natural environment enhances the positive health benefits of exercise. Attractive natural spaces increase motivation to
continue outdoor activity in the long term and promoting physical activity close to where people live, with an emphasis on walking, is more likely to result in sustained activity. Studies also show that exposure to nature aids recovery from daily stresses with benefits for mental health.

2.4 Early experience of nature is important in children’s development, especially before the age of 12, and contact with nature has been shown to aid concentration and self-discipline, and may even be helpful in dealing with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder which affects at least one in 20 schoolchildren in England and Wales.

2.5 Provision of suitable greenspaces, particularly woodland, both as tourist destinations and near to where people live, is the first step towards delivering these benefits. High quality greenspace has also been shown to have social and economic benefits, increasing social cohesion, attracting inward investment and increasing property values.

3. Access

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

3.1 The Woodland Trust is committed to inspiring people to enjoy and value woodland, for their own wellbeing as well as for the benefit of woods and wildlife. We have lobbied for more woodland access for many years and have provided new opportunities for woodland visiting by creating and caring for more woods near to people’s homes and encouraging them to get out and explore them.

3.2 The Trust advocates that there should be more publicly accessible woodland in line with the following Woodland Access Standard, which it has developed for public bodies and local authorities:

- no person should live more than 500m from at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 2ha in size; and

- there should also be at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 20ha within 4km (8km round trip) of people’s homes.

The Standard is intended to be used as an aspirational benchmark and a basis for discussion and decisions on provision of accessible woodland.

3.3 A recent study by the Woodland Trust and Europe Economics, ‘The Economic Benefits of Woodland’ provides some useful insights into woodland tourism. The Study found:

1 Natural England have endorsed the standard as complementary to Accessible Natural Green Space Standard (ANGSt), making it a useful addition to existing policy-making tools.
'Visiting woodlands is a very common form of tourism and the England Leisure Visits survey reported that 40 per cent of adults had visited woodland in the previous year, with a total of 290m visits. Of those, 25m were classed as tourism visits. There were around 400,000 hectares of accessible woodland in England in 2009. Ignoring any changes in either the accessible area or the number of visits between 2005 and 2009, for the sake of simplicity, there were therefore more than 700 visits for every accessible hectare of woodland in England. At a perpetual value, and a 3.5 per cent discount rate, the value of the recreational benefits is therefore nearly £21,000 per hectare of accessible woodland at 2008 prices, or around £23,000 in 2013 adjusting for GDP growth. The attraction for visitors will vary depending on the type of woodland, its geographical location and the amenities available in that wood. For example, more people might visit and the visits might have a higher value if a greater range of leisure activities is possible within an area of woodland'.

3.4 The Study further found that:

‘Most accessible woods are maintained as community assets, generally supported either by public bodies (often local authorities) or as an essentially philanthropic endeavour’.

There is perhaps scope here to develop an ecosystems payments angle: local tourist businesses benefit from farmers’ and other landowners’ management of the surrounding landscape (providing the attractive countryside and biodiversity that visitors come to see) but local tourist businesses do not contribute directly to the cost of providing that landscape. Perhaps they should (eg via a ‘tourism levy’)? Some hotels in the Lake District already ask their patrons to pay a small voluntary levy on their bills which goes towards maintenance of local footpaths and rights of way. This is possibly something the Natural Capital Committee could consider in the Defra 25 Year plan for the natural environment, if the standard agri-environment grants are gradually reducing.

3.5 For more than a decade the Woodland Trust has been gathering data on accessible woodland and analysing this to identify areas of deficit. Space for People is aimed at policy makers, health professionals and planners. It shows the amount of access people in the UK have to woodland close to their homes, and the Trust’s vision for increasing this, by district, county, region and country.

3.6 The Woodland Trust believes that in the spectrum of greenspace woods are of particular value. In urban areas especially, their visual prominence can create a balance between the built and natural environment. Woods cost little to maintain and can absorb large numbers of visitors, and since they are such rich natural habitats, they offer visitors an inspiring experience of contact with nature. We therefore believe that in terms of provision of natural green space, woods should be seen as the optimal habitat and that a separate standard for woodland, which should complement other natural green space access standards, is consequently needed.
3.7 In its manifesto the Government pledged to keep “our public forests and woodland... in trust for the nation”. The strength of public feeling revealed by the potential sale of the Public Forest Estate in 2011 means that long term public benefit, including accessible woodland destinations, must be at the heart of its strategic plan.

3.8 The Government’s 25 Year Plan for nature’s recovery is a key opportunity to inspire people about the value of nature – and how it enriches their lives and their children’s. The Trust would like to see provision within the plan for improved access to woodland, and innovative approaches to public engagement in order to tackle the barriers that hold some people back from enjoying nature. This would include ensuring people have the information they need – which could be as basic as knowing where woods and green spaces are - in an accessible format. It could also mean giving people a greater voice when it comes to the design and future management of green spaces.

4. Safeguards

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

4.1 As a general principle the Woodland Trust supports measures to incentivise the quality and quantity of woodland access. However, on sensitive sites, walkers with dogs, horse riding and cyclists can have a detrimental effect on conservation value, and recreational benefits should not override ecological sensitivity.

4.2 Newly created woods are robust habitats containing fewer sensitive species than ancient woodland; their potential to deliver woodland access with a minimum of conservation impact should not be under-valued. However, specialist recreational activities (e.g. 4 x 4 off road driving and paintball games) may be damaging, especially to semi-natural ancient and other important native woodland.

4.3 The Trust believes stronger controls are needed over inappropriate leisure activities in semi-natural ancient woodland, and that irreplaceable ancient woodland, which is fast disappearing, warrants strict protection in the National Planning Policy Framework.

**Case Study** illustrating protection of ancient woodland from built development.

**Forest Holidays planning application**

In 2015 Forest Holidays withdrew their bid to build 70 luxury cabins amid the ancient woodland of Fineshade Wood in Northamptonshire, following concern from the Woodland Trust and nearby residents.
The Forestry Commission, which owns the wood and retains a stake in Forest Holidays, describes the 200-hectare site as "an ancient mixed broadleaf and conifer woodland" with the latter being "restored" to broadleaved trees.

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