I am writing in response to the call for evidence into rural tourism by the Parliamentary EFRA committee. One of my main recreations is visiting the countryside, especially by bus, and though this submission is being made in a strictly individual capacity I belong to many organisations which either campaign for better rural transport or assist their members to plan visits. These include Cambs Campaign for Better Transport, of which I am coordinator and newsletter compiler; evidence of my interest in promoting rural visits can be seen in many of the newsletters on our website http://www.cambsbettertransport.org.uk -- and also the Foundation for Integrated Transport, which is currently sponsoring a project to develop public transport access to the countryside.

1. Introduction. Rural tourism plays three important roles in our national life:

1.1. It brings money and jobs into the rural economy.

1.2. It helps underpin the viability of rural services, including public transport, but also others such as local shops.

1.3. It improves the quality of life of visitors to the countryside.

It does, however, have some serious downsides, which stem largely from the fact that it is highly car dependent.

1.4. Moving traffic and parked cars seriously detract from the amenity of many rural areas, especially at peak times.

1.5. People may have to drive long distances to reach their destinations, thereby causing pollution.

1.6. People without access to cars may well miss out on the opportunity to use rural visits to improve their quality of life; or, conversely, they may be encouraged to aspire to owning cars which will also be used for local journeys and thereby seriously detract from the amenities of their own neighbourhoods.

2. Current problems. Whatever mode of transport one uses, the quality of the rural experience has been steadily declining in modern times, for the following reasons:

2.1. Agricultural intensification, which has robbed many areas of the wealth of wildlife that farmland used to support.

2.2. One often has to pass through sprawling suburbs before reaching the countryside.
2.3. During the Beeching era for those travelling by rail, and, to an alarming extent, in recent years for bus users, many of the most attractive routes have been lost, and the range of destinations one can reach has declined. And my impression is that bus operators have become very much stricter in terms of where they are willing to stop in areas where there are no marked stops -- which is of particular concern to people who have finished their walk and want to know where to pick their bus up.

2.4. For those travelling by car or coach, motorways and dual carriageways have made the scenery much more bland.

2.5. Walkers and cyclists have been hit by the ever increasing levels of traffic on rural roads (both main and subsidiary), and the increasing difficulty of bridging main highways and railways at a time when Network Rail seems to regard all level crossings as targets for closure, and, with the ever increasing cost of providing bridges compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act, planners are tempted to reduce provision -- and of course where no bridge is provided the DDA is of little use. Also, the new design of railway bridge seems to preclude views from the top except for very tall people.

2.6. There are also problems relating to aspects other than transport, such as the difficulty in getting sustenance en route at a time when rural shops are vulnerable to closure. (Note also that if the worry about whether food will be available tempts visitors to prepare their own sustenance in advance, this will only exacerbate the cycle and reduce the economic benefit to rural areas.) Closures of public lavatories -- it is rare to find any open in the evenings -- are also a problem.

3. Recommendations. I take the view that if we make it easier for more people, particularly those without access to or not wishing to use cars, to explore the countryside, then this will go a long way towards supporting rural enterprises that depend on visitors. There may be other measures that would help, but I am not dealing with them in this submission.

Clearly, the main role in developing sustainable transport would have to fall on local transport authorities. With the system on the brink of change as a result of the Government's devolution proposals, it is relevant to say here that it would help if the areas of these transport authorities transcended urban/rural boundaries so that city people visiting the countryside (and villagers visiting the big city) were represented equally with people travelling in their own local areas.

Local authorities need four things if they are to fulfil this role properly:

3.1. Powers -- that means they must be able to procure the services required to provide a basic, comprehensive network. Hopefully, where it applies, the franchising powers of the Bus Services Bill now before Parliament will confer such powers, though they may not always be necessary. Also needed are powers to develop good networks across local
authority boundaries -- all too often, at present, bus travel in boundary areas is hamstrung because adjacent local authorities don't cooperate.

3.2. Finance -- it costs money to support good public transport, though the amount is small compared with the cost of, say, major road projects or HS2. However it may still be beyond the reach of local authorities who have had money taken from them on a large scale in recent years. Money must be given back to them, ringfenced for public transport provision, in return for a statutory responsibility to provide a comprehensive network.

3.3. Incentives -- local authorities who provide good public transport should be rewarded, and it is not clear that the increasing prosperity of their local tourist industry, and the reduced cost of catering for traffic (both indigenous and from visitors) will be enough. Two ideas that would help with regard to visitor traffic in particular are to make responsibility for concessionary fare reimbursement fall to the local authority where the passholder lives -- why should a local authority pay the fares of visitors from another area? -- and to restore an organisation like the former Countryside Commission which used to give grants to schemes to improve public access to the countryside. (Also, provision of public transport access should be a statutory duty of organisations like National Park Authorities which are concerned with particular areas.)

3.4. Expertise -- an organisation like Transport Focus should (after extensive consultation with bus users and others) develop a good practice guide for local authorities. It is to be hoped that this would strengthen the hand of bus users demanding that their local authorities live up to the recommendations of such a guide.

Here are some specific recommendations which would be of value to both local residents and visitors to the countryside.

3.4.1. All main services to run at regular intervals, at easily memorised times, and with smart but reliable connections at suitable points with other buses and with rail. Extensive cross country routes to be created so that people don't have to make numerous changes for a journey that avoids the main corridors.

3.4.2. In remoter areas, school buses to be open to the general public, including a positioning run to return them to town following their afternoon run. This is exactly the time when people visiting the relevant area of countryside are likely to want to start their return trip. Going beyond this, other vehicles on regular schedules could also carry passengers, such as mail delivery/collection vehicles, which used to provide a postbus network in many areas of England, Wales and Scotland, with over 250 routes in Scotland alone, but is now down to just 1 in the whole of the UK (also in Scotland). Also, while most visitors prefer fixed schedules to demand responsive services, where the latter exist they should make every effort to be visitor friendly.
3.4.3. Again in remoter areas, there should be worktime buses -- possibly on a demand responsive basis -- so that local residents can take up jobs in their nearest town, except that they could use the school bus for the journey into town during termtime. These buses could also be used by visitors to access farmhouse accommodation, going out one evening and returning the next morning, and booking their accommodation and bus journeys simultaneously, so this would help rural diversification.

3.4.4. All major visitor attractions should be accessible on Sundays (at least in summer).

3.4.5. New coach routes should be created along trunk routes such as the A14, A34 and A303, with regular stops en route equipped with real time information, off road waiting areas and cycle parking, which would become gateways to the local countryside, with cycle hire at some locations.

3.4.6. All local transport authorities should be required to produce printed maps showing the full extent of their public transport network. (Until recent cuts most of them did do this, and some still do. Note that online provision is not sufficient because it is often difficult for people to get good printouts of online maps.) Cities, towns that are tourist hotspots, and regional attractions should also produce guides giving a list of local attractions with details of how to get there by public transport. The aim should be that the whole of England should fall within the area covered by one or other city/town in this way. Rail operators should be involved in marketing trips based on these guides, as many trips -- almost all trips from London -- will begin with a rail journey.

Local authorities should also ensure that roadside timetables are kept up to date -- for one thing this will help reassure visitors that they are waiting at the right stop. The possibility should be explored of asking parish councils to find local volunteers to maintain displays at their local stops, with timetables emailed by the council when required. This would avoid the expense of paying a council officer to tour the county every time services changed.

There are also some measures that would be the responsibility of planning authorities, or other local organisations not specifically concerned with public transport.

3.4.7. It should become easier to create new walking routes where these are necessary to enable walkers to go from bus stop to visitor attraction, or other recreational walking, without having to trudge along heavily trafficked roads (which these days include subsidiary as well as main routes). In general, landowners should be required to accommodate such routes subject to their own reasonable needs, and subject to receiving fair compensation (which would not entitle them to hold the local authority up to ransom).

3.4.8. A supermarket parking tax would help to protect owners of local shops -- whether in villages or market towns, or urban neighbourhoods for that matter -- from unfair competition.
3.4.9. Where public lavatories are not available, owners of public places with lavatories should be encouraged to open them up to all who wish to use them -- and in some circumstances this may be required as a condition of a licence. The availability of such facilities should be advertised from outside -- it's no use having them if people can't tell where they are.

3.4.10. As part of the National Curriculum, teenage schoolchildren should be taught how to plan and undertake trips. If it became a lifelong habit for even a small fraction of them, as it has for me, the cost would be recouped many times over in terms of increased prosperity for the rural transport network (and rural tourism generally).

3.4.11. Rail operators should be required to reduce fares for people making journeys out of the big cities in the morning. At present, with no cheap fares on many routes available till after 09.30 or so, half the day is gone by the time one reaches one's destination!

3.4.12. For the same reason, we should move towards GMT+1 in winter (i.e. not moving the clocks back at the end of October), when an extra hour of daylight in the early evening is most needed.

3.4.13. For online accommodation bookings, there should be a filter enabling singles to choose accommodation where they don't have to pay for two people.

3.4.14. All means available should be used to ensure that all tourist publicity includes details of public transport access, and that opening times are aligned with public transport operation. No tourist enterprise of any sort should receive grant aid or tax relief if it flouts the latter -- at present, most commonly by opening only on Sundays when the local bus runs Mon-Sat. There should also be an accreditation system to reward enterprises that do particularly well in attracting sustainable transport users.

3.4.15. Set up a website on which people could be alerted to one off opportunities, which could range from special openings of normally closed attractions (especially if shuttle buses from stations are provided) to the provision of extra stops by rail replacement buses which happen to go past normally inaccessible attractions. (For example, when the line between Wool and Dorchester is closed, the replacement bus goes past Monkeyworld and Lawrence of Arabia's cottage, and within a mile of Pallington Lakes Sculpture Park, none of which currently have any regular service.)

4. Let me now go through the terms of reference of the Inquiry and see how the above fits into them.

We are asked to:
4.1. Encourage more people to visit the countryside -- all the above recommendations would do that, with 3.4.11-12 encouraging winter visits and
4.1.1. encouraging longer visits by singles.

4.2. Support rural diversification -- see 3.4.3, and 3.4.8 would also help.

4.3. Help preserve the character of local communities -- encouraging access by means other than the car would go a long way towards this.

And we are asked to address the following questions:

4.4. Marketing: see 3.4.6, 3.4.10, 3.4.14 and 3.4.15. In addition travel columns of newspapers should be encouraged to deal with the question of how people are to get around when they reach their holiday area. If people were encouraged to choose holiday areas with good local transport, it would provide a powerful incentive for local authorities to develop good networks for the benefit of their tourist industries.

4.5. Access: again, almost everything above would help to improve access. In particular 3.4.7 would improve access on foot.

4.6. Funding: My contention is that the greatest need is to fund better buses, but the marketing measures would help to support rural enterprises by enabling custom to develop more quickly, and 3.4.8 would help to support local shops.

4.7. National Parks etc. should be encouraged to develop policies that would restrict car use as soon as adequate public transport was available as an alternative. If these include higher car parking charges then the proceeds could go towards their general funds for further improvements.

4.8. Infrastructure and skills: I haven't covered this one. I believe that there is too much of a tendency to concentrate on infrastructure at the expense of the much smaller amounts of money required to meet the current costs of facilities such as public transport.

4.9. Local environment and character: this is best protected by helping and encouraging people not to bring their cars in (or hire cars when they get there, except for particular purposes for which they may be unavoidable).

4.10. DEFRA role: set up an organisation dedicated to developing opportunities for sustainable rural tourism, like the former Countryside Commission. Incidentally, the list of other Government departments who might support rural tourism should include the Department for Education -- see 3.4.10.

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