I refer to the Inquiry launched by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee into the role of tourism in supporting rural growth in England.

My comments are submitted on behalf of the County Durham Local Access Forum, a statutory body established under Section 94 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to advise local authorities and other agencies on the improvement of public access to land for the purposes of outdoor recreation and enjoyment.

The LAF understands that the Inquiry is examining a number of matters relating to supporting rural growth, but in view of our remit I shall focus comments on Government policies relating to access and specifically with regard to your question “What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?”.

Having canvassed the views of Members of the Forum we consider the following are important points to take into account. In general access opportunities are improved by:

- Well located places to park and good access by public transport acknowledging that often the most sustainable routes and those which should be the focus of promotion are those in proximity to urban areas.
- Widely available information on where people can go and what they can do.
- A rights of way network and access land that is in good condition and is easy to use.
- Promoting opportunities to the whole community.

More specifically the Local Access Forum advises the following:

- **Maximising opportunities presented by the Coastal Path**: An opportunity to increase rural tourism has been missed by creating the England Coast Path for walkers only. Natural England should be encouraged to identify suitable sections so that horse riders and cyclists can use it too. Allowing higher access rights (for cyclists and horse riders) would encourage use by a broader range of interests.

- **Valuing the Green Belt and countryside around towns**: As housing demand grows the pressure on the Green Belt land is exacerbated; it is our view that the value of Green Belt as a resource for outdoor recreation is not always appreciated. Government statistics show that we are losing Green Belt land at the fastest rate since records began in 1997 (Peter Waine & Oliver Hilliam: 22 Ideas that saved the English Countryside, Frances Lincoln Ltd, London, 2016). If the Government is serious about giving people better access to the coast and the countryside, a good starting point would be to protect Green Belt land and the countryside around towns generally, placing it at the heart
of re-establishing the connection between people and nature, creating new opportunities for recreation, health and learning, and producing local food.

- **Invest in projects to reclaim lost historic rights of way:** Many routes in the countryside exist but which are not recorded on the ‘definitive map’ and will be lost when the definitive record is closed in 2026. The LAF considers that more resources should be made available to local authorities and/or other groups for researching and recording lost ways – or that the deadline be postponed.

- **Extend the right to roam:** Although the CROW Act 2000 has opened up almost 11,000 square miles of mountains, moorland, heath and downland to public access, some 90% of England & Wales remains inaccessible (Waine & Hilliam op. cit.). Meanwhile the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 has opened most of Scotland to public access – mountains, moorland, farmland (including the margins of fields in which crops are growing), forests, woods, rivers, lochs, reservoirs, beaches and coastline – for a range of activities including walking, cycling, horse-riding, swimming and camping, provided the right is exercised responsibly by respecting the environment, privacy, safety, livelihoods, etc. Furthermore landowners have a duty to manage land and water responsibly in relation to public access. Perhaps consideration should therefore be given to examining the Scottish experience and assessing the extent to which it could be applied in England and Wales.

- **Access for people with disabilities:** Over the past 11 years a charity called Blind Life in Durham, working with other disabled groups has identified problems facing disabled people who are not keen on walking in the countryside without some support from an able bodied person. Members of the charity were asked to give feedback about the issues they face and they referred to a feeling of vulnerability and unsafe, access arrangements unsuitable for their needs and a lack of information about the opportunities available. To address these issues the charity has begun using an experienced guide to provide information and instil confidence amongst those taking part. This has made a big difference to the number of people taking part giving new walkers an incentive to participate. Other initiatives include advertising bus routes leading to suitable walks and camcorder footage showing the conditions likely to be faced.

**Sources of information:**
It was felt that there is a lack of information on where people can go and what they can do some suggestions included:

- The destination and the distance appear on the arms of all finger posts on the ROW network.
- Parish Councils should be encouraged to identify circular routes for walkers, horse riders and cyclists in their area. Maps should be available on the parish website and on any notice boards within the parish.
- User groups should be encouraged and assisted to provide guide books (in print or online) of proven circular routes with suitable parking places.
In conclusion, the LAF considers that improved and more secure funding for local authorities’ Rights of Way Teams is the best way of protecting and enhancing access to the countryside and coast which would ensure that existing rights of access are properly resourced. The LAF would also like to stress the importance of long-term funding commitments from the Government to the management of National Trails, including the England Coast Path.

*September 2016*