‘The ‘beautiful countryside’ remains the strongest perception of the north of England’.

‘Cumbria is well placed to continue to derive benefit from international and domestic campaigns which feature the North of England’
Tourism Growth Plan for Cumbria, 2016, Cumbria LEP.

1. Background

Cumbria Tourism is a member and supporter of the Tourism Alliance. The Tourism Alliance sets out clear policies to:

- enhance business competitiveness
- boost export earnings
- drive growth in England’s regions
- support for the rural economy
- rebuild seaside destinations

Cumbria Tourism strongly supports the Tourism Alliance policy priorities which are further detailed in the Appendix One.

In addition to the Tourism Alliance position and based specifically on our experience of rural tourism in Cumbria, Cumbria Tourism makes the following comments in relation to the growth opportunities the visitor economy provides in England’s rural areas.

Tourism in Cumbria accounts for at least 20% of England’s rural tourism market, some £2.6 billion of visitor expenditure measured in 2015. Tourism in Cumbria supports over 35,000 FTE’s and represents over 20% of Cumbria’s entire GVA. In the rural areas of Cumbria such as the Lake District National Park and the Eden Valley, the importance of tourism and dependence on visitors is much higher than the 20% GVA average for the County of Cumbria.

Using VisitEngland’s definition of Rural Tourism categories, Cumbria has a significant range of product falling under the ‘Dramatic Countryside, Market Towns and Villages and Rural Countryside’ categories. In terms of geographic based brands, within Cumbria’s administrative boundary there is the Lake District National Park, part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, part of Hadrian’s Wall World Heritage Site, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty on the Solway Estuary, Morecambe Bay and part of the North Pennines. All of these areas, to a greater or lesser extent, are reliant on tourism and the visitor economy. All areas, again to greater of lesser extent, are also involved in tourism marketing and development activities, these activities are undertaken by various organisations, (for information, a list of organisations is contained in the Appendix Two). In addition to the range of rural tourism brands and protected area designations, there are also town and village based marketing
and development activities, for example there are Business Improvement Districts (BIDS) in Kendal, Ulverston, Penrith and Barrow (pending). Marketing associations exist in Keswick, Ullswater, Carlisle, the Eden Valley and in West Cumbria.

Overarching all these initiatives is the Cumbria wide Destination Organisation (DO) namely Cumbria Tourism. Cumbria Tourism uses the strongest brand and County name (The Lake District, Cumbria) as an ‘umbrella’ destination brand to promote the County of Cumbria and all the destination and thematic brands it contains. This approach has been incredibly successful with over 40 million visits made to Cumbria and 17 million visits to the Lake District National Park. These visits are accommodated by a Cumbria population of 500,000 and Lake District National Park population of just over 40,000 residents and demonstrates that the County is one of the (if not the) most successful rural destinations in the UK. Further evidence of this success are the recent awards for being the UK’s ‘most walked’ destination (OS Maps, 2016), UK Dog Friendly Destination (Kennel Club 2016); Sustainable Destination Award 2014; Wanderlust Magazine and Countryfile Magazine Top UK Destination Awards 2015 and many others over the years.

Cumbria Tourism (CT) has a membership of over 2,500 businesses, a staff of 14 FTE’s and a range of expertise covering marketing, PR, policy and strategy, research and intelligence. CT was established as a private company limited by guarantee in 1996, evolving from one of the then ten Regional Tourist Boards in England. CT has worked with the official national tourism bodies for over 40 years and for the last five years has worked with Visit England and VisitBritain and a wide range of partner organisations in the delivery of the Government’s Growth Strategy for Tourism.

The Lake District, Cumbria has maintained its position as the premier destination in England in terms of visitor satisfaction across a wide range of indicators. That the County’s tourism industry has managed to achieve this despite the economic recession, global competition, the cutbacks in public spending and the vastly reduced resources available to the Destination Organisation is testament to the tenacity of tourism businesses, the Destination Organisation and other partners in Cumbria.

According to VisitEngland’s research, the Government’s ‘Growing Tourism Locally’ RGF Cumbria programme, delivered by Cumbria Tourism, delivered just under £50 million of additional expenditure and supported over 750 jobs.

There is clear evidence that Cumbria’s visitor economy (predominantly rural tourism based) has been the main driver of economic recovery for Cumbria over the last 5 years.

Whilst we recognise that new and innovative approaches are needed to grow rural tourism in England and that marketing has a key role to play, we respectfully suggest that there are more fundamental issues facing rural areas like Cumbria. Growth in the visitor economy will only reach its full potential when rural areas, towns and villages are made sufficiently attractive places live, work and be educated. This requires considerable investment in infrastructure, in particular improved transport connectivity, more affordable housing, broadband and mobile communications, better schools and hospitals as well as investment
in visitor facilities such as car parking, broadband and mobile technologies, public conveniences and recreation facilities.

It is in this broader context Cumbria Tourism comments on the specific issues highlighted in the Rural Tourism Inquiry.

2. Comments on the Inquiry’s Specific Issues

2.1 How can more people, both from the UK and abroad, be encouraged to visit more of England’s rural places, for longer and at all times of the year?

According to VisitBritain, awareness of England’s rural visitor offer remains at a low level in most of the overseas markets.

- Greater resources are needed to raise the awareness in the priority overseas markets and with resources being scarce the most effective way forward would be further refine the priority countries and the market segments within them to focus marketing activity in order to drive interest and bookings. The same principle would apply to UK markets where awareness and understanding of the product is greater than that of overseas markets.

- Potential consumers of the rural tourism product need to be furnished with enticing information at the right time and at a competitive price. Invariably this information is collated by Destination Organisations and this content is communicated to consumers via various channels. Any failure to convert the product information to bookings is normally due to a failure to provide the consumer with a sufficiently attractive proposition at the right time or at the right price.

- Improving the performance of rural areas will be delivered by improving the product, better presentation of the product offer and better target marketing.

- In the current climate of declining marketing budgets, it is important to promote the benefits of collaborative and partnership working between businesses, between Destination Organisations and with national bodies such as VisitEngland and VisitBritain.

- Cumbria Tourism and many tourism businesses in Cumbria are committed to working under the Northern England umbrella brand and in particular with urban and ‘gateway’ areas in the north such as Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and London where most overseas visitors visiting Cumbria enter the UK.

2.2 How can farmers and rural residents be encouraged to diversify into tourism and grow their businesses?

The interdependency of tourism and farming has long been recognised as a synergy vital to the prosperity of rural communities. Since the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in 2001, the farming and tourism sectors have worked closely together on farm diversification, sustainable tourism and local produce initiatives. Many farming families derive income directly from visitors and many are involved in collaborative marketing activity via the destination organisation and other partnerships. Grants from European Union sources have played an important part in farm tourism and other rural tourism initiatives.

- It is important that support for hill farming communities continues as high priority as the UK formulates the Tourism Exit Strategy. Cumbria Tourism will continue to strongly support Cumbria’s farming communities and, resources permitting, is
committed to working in partnership with the agricultural sector to maintain the much loved landscapes of the Lake District and Cumbria.

We acknowledge that many rural communities suffer from low levels of enterprise activity. This situation can be partly cultural and partly due to the lack of understanding of development opportunities in rural areas. In terms of cultural barriers, rural areas in common with other areas, suffer from a misplaced negative perception of tourism and the visitor economy.

- Careers in tourism need to be more attractively portrayed in schools and colleges, similarly there is need to improve the understanding of how the supply chain to the visitor economy functions and also how many of these supply chain companies and services can also provide highly skilled work and career progression opportunities.
- In terms of the lack of development opportunities, many rural areas are virtually ‘land locked’ having prohibitive and discouraging planning policies. Developable land is in short supply in many rural areas inflating land values and restricting enterprise to those individuals or organisations who have the ability to invest and afford to speculate. The cost of obtaining planning permission and development therefore discourages enterprise from many farmers and rural residents.
- Government should consider investment in support services and a more accommodating planning regime to overcome these barriers to growth.

2.3 How can the needs of visitors be balanced with the need to preserve the environment and the character of local communities?

Cumbria Tourism supports the ‘conservation’ of the environment rather than its ‘preservation’, and prefers to recognise that land and communities are in a continuing state of evolution. Cumbria Tourism has many years of experience of an adapting and evolving dynamic between visitors and host communities. In most situations of conflict between visitors and host communities and the environment, solutions and compromises have been found.

- There is a large repository of experience within the destination organisation network, VisitEngland, DEFRA and local authorities which should be made aware of good/best practice so that local problems can be overcome.

There are a raft of policies and regulations in place to protect and preserve the environment. There have also been many initiatives to promote ‘wise growth’ encouraging businesses and consumers to adopt environmentally friendly technologies. Many of these initiatives are/were supported with Rural Development Funding.

- We suggest that the best performing of these initiatives should continue to be supported so that latest technologies and techniques are communicated as widely as possible.

2.4 Marketing - How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England?
Defining ‘rural destinations’ as a singular generic entity under sells the rich and diverse range of destination types and experiences that this umbrella term covers. As well as the VisitEngland categories i.e. ‘Dramatic Countryside, Market Towns and Villages and Rural Countryside’ the term ‘rural destinations’ covers many different types of location e.g. coast, countryside, Lakes, Moors, National Parks, Country Parks etc.

These destination types offer different kinds of experience and have different levels of appeal to the market. Within England there are strong and mature rural tourism brands and there are also less mature developing rural brands. The impact of national ‘rural tourism’ marketing campaigns is sometimes diluted, as a generic approach can dilute the appeal of strong brands and can sometimes over promise and under deliver in the weaker rural tourism areas. Stronger brands deliver a greater return on investment and usually can create critical mass of activity that is more likely to be economically sustainable when public funding intervention comes to an end. We appreciate that many rural areas have access to a wide range of grant funding from differing sources and Government bodies. These bodies have different objectives and reasons for their interventions. Nevertheless, some initiatives have a large marketing/communication element which can duplicate or overlap with other local or strategic marketing initiatives. In these circumstances intervention can result in confusing messages, fragmentation, duplication and overlapping efforts and ultimately poor use of scarce public funding resources. There are many Government Agencies/Departments/Quangos who receive and/or allocate public funding. It is important that the effectiveness of all initiatives using public funding is measured in a consistent format. Accountability for public spending on tourism and visitor activity needs to be improved and should be an urgent matter for national and local scrutiny and review.

- Cumbria Tourism is concerned that scarce public funds being used to stimulate economic growth should be required to be deliver best practice in terms of return on investment.
- All Government agencies involved in tourism marketing and development should be more accountable to the private sector led Local Enterprise Partnerships.

**What more should the Government do to support this work?**

Cumbria Tourism strongly believes that there is need for sub regional coordination of tourism, embracing rural and other sectors of tourism.

- Coordination and evidenced based guidance to support national and local Government is needed at a level where there are a sufficient number of coherent consumer recognised brands that need to work together under a larger geography to achieve a critical mass that can work at national and international levels.

This strategic coordination role should be determined by the number of businesses committed to collaboration and investment in collaborative marketing activities.

- In the absence of official data on the Cumbrian visitor economy, Government should match fund this private sector led approach to enable consistent data collection and gathering of industry statistics.
To help redress the imbalance between London and northern areas and rural and urban areas, a longer term and sustained regional growth programme (RGF) should be instigated.

Coordinated marketing activity delivers indirect benefits as well as direct employment/expenditure growth benefits. Marketing investment can draw in great match income and collaboration under a destination umbrella. Marketing investment can also help subsidise market research and evaluation to help further inform ongoing policy and strategy.

Government should also be doing more to help reduce the reliance of accommodation businesses on Online Travel Agencies (OTAs). High commission charges from OTAs can result in a reduced profits and less money to invest in product and service improvements. OTAs commission charges extract millions of pounds from the local economy which inevitably impacts on the local supply chain so vital to rural areas. Sustainable tourism is reliant on creating economically sustainable destinations.

- Government and national tourism bodies need to give more recognition to the role of Destination Organisations and the role they play in sustainable tourism and in creating sustainable communities.
- The national tourism agencies should give recognition to the FairBookingUK campaign, a partnership between VisitCornwall, The New Forest and Cumbria Tourism.

The campaign promotes a ‘local’ alternative to OTA channels and seeks to educate consumers on the benefits booking locally and direct with accommodation providers. The FairBooking booking movement is more advanced in France and Germany with thousands of accommodation businesses involved. Local booking initiatives like FairBooking are beneficial to the local economy creating wealth, employment and greater profitability enabling reinvestment and continuous improvement.

2.5 Access

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

Improvements are needed to road, rail, sea and air transport throughout the UK. In terms of overseas visitors, continued improvements to airports and other gateways is needed. Railway services especially at weekends are generally poor and a lot more could be done to specifically link weekend services with rural and coastal destinations with the main city based railway hubs (e.g. ticketing ‘the Lake District weekender’ or the ‘Cornwall or Peak District etc.’).

With 66% journeys taken for leisure purposes on the West Coast Main Line, Cumbria Tourism will continue to lobby for a greater number of services and better facilities for the leisure traveller, especially at weekends.

Cumbria also benefits from having the Settle to Carlisle railway and Cumbria Coastal railway, both railways offer the potential to deliver more visitors sustainably to lesser known and visited areas of Cumbria. Again, weekend and leisure oriented services are scarce on these
railways, the coastal railway in particular needs upgrading, for example, with manned level crossings needing replacement with automatic barriers and facilities at stations for more cyclists and walkers.

- Innovative sustainable transport projects should be expanded to continue to reduce the reliance on car transport and be further integrated as part of the visitor experience.
- Greater encouragement of ‘staying visitors’ should be the focus of national campaigns as opposed to day trips.

Government (national and local) urgently needs to recognise the needs of visitors and the importance of tourism in transport planning and investment.

2.6 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?

Cumbria Tourism strongly supports the reduction of VAT on hospitality businesses which as demonstrated by the Tourism Alliance would result in a net gain in tax receipts from the growth in expenditure that would be generated. VAT reduction would also help boost the UKs reputation for good value in key overseas markets.

There are already a range of funding policies that support rural tourism. However, there is little collaboration between the funding schemes which we believe would benefit from greater coordination and alignment with regional and national Tourism Strategies.

- Rural Development Programme (RDP), Heritage Lottery Funding (HLF), Coastal Communities Funding (CCF) etc. do not align strongly enough to the local or national (England or Cumbria) Tourism Strategy.
- Support is needed to fund feasibility and concept planning costs. Better/specialist start up advice needed and tax incentives for the first five years of operation. Car parking charges should be ring-fenced and only used for reinvestment and maintenance in the public realm. Public funding could be released from better use of existing resources and reduction in local administration costs.
- Seasonality remains a big issue for many smaller businesses particularly in the remoter rural areas. Business rates are not sensitive to seasonality issues and more could be done to support rural based businesses in this respect.

2.7 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?

Planning and regulation services are delivered by a vast and complex range of public bodies making it difficult for potential developers to navigate and further innovative ideas.

- Central Government should continue to seek to reduce the regulatory burden in this respect and to reduce the number of consultative bodies and local authorities.
Further research and feasibility plans need to be undertaken to guide and drive investment and to open up further visitor economy opportunities. In the absence of poor (local) Government data on the visitor economy, a stronger evidence base will help determine priorities and strengthen local strategies and plans.

CT supports the reinstatement and updating of Tourism Planning Guidance. Based on recent evidence and good practice, the guidance is needed to help businesses and planning authorities find the right balance between development and environmental protection, thereby helping to facilitate appropriate economic growth in rural areas.

2.8 **Skills**

How can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?

Further efforts are needed to align the needs of businesses with qualifications and the Government backed skills improvement programmes. In rural areas there is an acute shortage of labour and skills and there is a high demand for suitably qualified people to work in the tourism industry and supply chain. Depopulation and an ageing population continues to be problem for rural areas. Government policy should ensure that rural areas are made more attractive for young people to live and work.

- Tourism bodies and public funded inward investment should be aligned to ensure that all promotional activities highlight the benefits of living, working and being educated in rural areas of England. Current efforts are fragmented and scarce public resources are spread too thinly.

Rural tourism is dominated by small and micro businesses, often such businesses are lacking ICT and business management skills. There is also a lack of specialist tourism marketing and management advice available for visitor dependent businesses.

- Given the importance and scale of the tourism sector in Cumbria, the Local Enterprise Partnership and skills delivery organisations would benefit from undertaking a Tourism Skills Needs and Recruitment Plan.

2.9 **Local environment and character**

How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

The resources to enhance the local environment and character are very scarce and only very modest and small scale improvements have been made in most areas of rural Cumbria in recent years. In many instances, there are barely the funds available to do routine maintenance let alone undertake enhancements. The highest number of complaints Cumbria Tourism receives relate to public realm issues in particular the lack of public conveniences, the cost and quality of parking provision, the maintenance of walls and hedgerows and the proliferation of uncoordinated road, telecom and other utility maintenance programmes.
Local Authorities should act more positively to promote and support tourism in Cumbria and should be required to develop plans and strategies which take into account the needs of visitors and the tourism industry.

RDP, HLF, CCF and other funds should give greater priority to the enhancement of the historic character of town centres and high streets, and working with the Local Authorities to improve the public realm.

In the Lake District it is anticipated that confirmation of World Heritage Site status will provide a platform to make the case for greater public funding investment in the urban and rural environment of the National Park.

2.10 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?

Government intervention in tourism development and marketing responsibilities permeates through many Government Departments and results in a diluted and confusing range of policy initiatives. More resources appear to be available for rural tourism initiatives via DEFRA than via the lead Department for tourism DCMS. In recent years Government policies have resulted in fragmentation and the undermining the strategic coordination and marketing role of the Destination Organisation in Cumbria. Businesses have been concerned with this trend as more and more public funding resources are allocated to unaccountable bodies.

- Resources need to be made available to support a coherent sub national tourism Destination Organisation structure to ensure that evidence is collated and collected to inform strategic investments made by various Government departments.
- Tourism needs to have a higher profile in government given it’s potential to continue to drive inward investment, bring visitors in from overseas, and support rural communities.

We would urge DEFRA to work more closely with the LEP and DMOs on visitor economy matters to ensure that scarce resources are used effectively.

APPENDICES

Appendix One - Tourism Alliance – The Tourism Briefing Document 2015.


Appendix Two – Marketing Initiatives in Cumbria

District and City Councils
Morecambe Bay Partnership
Western Lakes District Partnership
North Pennines Tourism Partnership/AONB
Lake District National Park (Partnership)
Solway Partnership/AONB
Western Lakes District and Coast Ltd
Hadrian’s Wall
Carlisle Ambassadors
Eden Tourism Network
Yorkshire Dales National Park (part)
Cumbria’s Living Heritage
Lakes Culture (Cultural Destinations)
Kendal BID & Kendal Futures
Ulverston BID
Penrith BID
Keswick Tourism Association
Ullswater Tourism Association
Lake District Hotels Association
Lakes Hospitality Association
More than the Lakes
West Cumbria Fisheries LAG

Appendix Three – Lake District Brand Satisfaction

Source: VisitEngland Brand and Satisfaction Tracker, February 2015
Read more here:

September 2016