EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Caravan Club puts forward the following recommendations for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee’s consideration.

i) That rural tourism funding models are re-evaluated (including for VisitEngland) and initiatives which foster pride in a community and/or region are encouraged and supported.

ii) That the tourism ‘landscape’ is considered as a whole, and EU funding streams are replaced by central Government sources after 2020, but targeted to rural tourism businesses including local farming communities (as opposed to major landowners).

iii) That car- and motorhome-based visitors are not overlooked and indeed are welcomed; and appropriate signage to safe, reasonably price/free parking exists.

iv) That rural public transport is available, reliable, reasonably-priced and simple/easy to book.

v) That the Good Practice Guide for Tourism be reintroduced, updated if required, to provide clear planning guidance for tourism businesses and local authorities.

vi) That Schedule 2, Part 5, Class B of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 be amended to include Exempted Organisations (under the 1960 Act).

vii) That the roll-out of usable superfast broadband to rural areas is prioritised and the plan is communicated to rural businesses.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Caravan Club welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to this EFRA Committee inquiry on Rural Tourism in England. As Europe’s premier touring organisation, The Caravan Club currently represents one million caravan, motorhome and trailer tent owners and their families in the UK and parts of continental Europe – the majority of whom (around 850,000) reside in England.

The Club runs England’s largest privately-owned network of 152 high quality sites which, along with the English Certificated Locations (or CLs – small sites with a maximum of five pitches), provide over 17 million touring ‘bed nights’ per annum – the vast majority of which are in rural areas. Members staying on these English sites spend more than £288 million per annum off site, which in turn supports the equivalent of about 5,500 full-time jobs.
The Club itself is a successful £100+ million turnover business providing a wide range of services and activities for its members. Caravanning remains the most popular paid-for holiday choice in the country, with 26% of UK holiday nights spent in a caravan or motorhome.

2. THE CARAVAN CLUB’S VIEWS

Where it feels that it is appropriate to do so, The Caravan Club comments as follows on some of the issues to be considered by the EFRA Committee.

2.1 Tourism funding

2.1.1 The Caravan Club prides itself on the quality of the sites and facilities it provides, but it is the attraction of the destination or locality beyond the site boundary that provides the all-important ‘reason to travel’. In the case of rural tourism, factors such as: accessibility to the countryside (maintenance and signage of footpaths, bridleways etc); beauty of the landscape; environmental quality; wildlife interest; the character/authenticity of villages and communities; heritage attractions; festivals/events and the presence of other outdoor activities (riding, kayaking, climbing etc etc); are all key factors which determine choices for holidays and breaks.

2.1.2 In this respect the decline in public sector funding for domestic marketing over recent years to promote all that the English countryside has to offer to potential visitors has been disappointing and has been particularly felt in rural areas. Bearing in mind that 90% of visitors are from the UK, this represents a missed opportunity to grow the sector and for these rural areas to benefit from the economic dividends tourism brings.

2.1.3 Sub-national tourism structures, post-abolition of the RDAs in 2010, along with the increasing fragmentation into DMOs and LEPs makes it well near impossible for national organisations such as The Caravan Club, to develop and maintain relationships with over 200 bodies with varying responsibility for tourism.

2.1.4 2010 also saw around £65m of expenditure removed from regional economies, whilst at the same time local authority funding of tourism activity declined by around 30%. This shortfall is being felt very keenly in many destinations, and it shows.

2.1.5 Getting the basics right should never be overlooked and needs adequate funding. This includes clean (and open!) public toilets, clear signage, adequate and safe parking and attractive public spaces and gardens. All these things benefit residents and tourists alike, and contribute to a feel-good factor about a place. Conversely the progressive degradation
of the public realm contributes to a poor visitor experience and make an extended stay or repeat trip unlikely.

2.1.6 We would therefore suggest that a realistic level of core funding is essential for Visit England to resume domestic tourism activities. Whilst the £40m Discover England Fund is certainly welcome, it is of necessity product-led, and targeted to inbound visitors – although with the implicit assumption that domestic tourism will benefit also. Ring-fenced funding for tourism is also required at a regional level and should be promoted wherever possible at the LEP and destination level.

2.1.7 The status of EU funding to rural tourism businesses via the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and its potential replacement from UK Government funding streams, is of course under review post the EU Referendum, as is the considerable existing funds allocated under the European Structural & Investment Fund (ESIF) which currently benefit many remoter rural areas. Some of this European support is targeted at schemes which benefit the environment and there is a risk of degradation of habitat with vital elements such as watercourse quality suffering in the process.

**Recommendations**

i) That funding models are re-evaluated (including for VisitEngland) and initiatives which foster pride in a community and/or region are encouraged and supported.

ii) That the tourism ‘landscape’ is considered as a whole, and EU funding streams are replaced by central Government sources after 2020 but targeted to rural tourism businesses including local farming communities (as opposed to major landowners).

2.2 Access

2.2.1 Over 85% of visitor trips to rural areas are made by private car, so whilst it is important to continually improve public transport services, provision for car-based tourists should not be overlooked. Safe, affordable parking and signage is important, as is due consideration given to integration with public transport modes.

2.2.2 Private parking companies can cause immense problems for visitors (we know this from our members’ experiences), not only when height barriers are installed (preventing some motorhomes from being able to park safely), but unscrupulous operators and extortionate parking charges create a poor visitor experience and can leave a lasting negative impression of an area or destination.
2.2.3 Motorhomes are an increasingly popular option for visitors, with motorhome and camper van owners accounting for 44% of new Caravan Club members. Available and safe parking for these visitors should not be overlooked and accommodating their needs has obvious benefits in terms of their support of rural businesses. By their very nature, Caravan Club members are vehicle owners but once pitched on site, many prefer to use local transport networks to access attractions in the locality, or enjoy walking or cycling to explore the local area – this particularly applies to the motorhome owners referred to above.

2.2.4 Information provision is key so that visitors know what options exist before arriving in an area, and real-time public transport information, such as how long a bus will take to arrive to a particular stop, is now expected. Unfortunately this is closely linked to the existence and quality of the broadband/wifi connection which is often non-existent or patchy at best (see also 2.4).

**Recommendations**

iii) That car- and motorhome- based visitors are not overlooked and indeed are welcomed, and appropriate signage to safe, reasonably price/free parking exists.

iv) That rural public transport is available, reliable, reasonably-priced and simple/easy to book.

### 2.3 Planning

2.3.1 The current planning framework does not provide sufficient guidance on tourism development in rural areas and this leads to uncertainty and delays. ‘The Good Practice Guide for Tourism’ published by DCLG in 2006 in close collaboration with the tourism sector (now replaced by a single page on tourism development but only applicable to urban centres), provided an invaluable tool for businesses looking to develop in an appropriate (to the local area) and sustainable way.

2.3.2 Caravan Club Sites and Certificated Locations are for those who wish to pursue caravanning as a recreational activity, with the maximum stay being 21 days on one of The Club’s touring sites and 28 days on a Certificated Location. (CL). These are operated under the Exemption Certificate granted to The Club under the 1960 Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act (the 1960 Act).

2.3.3 Today’s caravanners expect a range of facilities on caravan sites. Commercial touring caravan site owners, as opposed to Exempt Organisations (under the 1960 Act) like ourselves, have the benefit of Schedule 2, Part 5, Class B of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995, whereby any physical development required
by a Site Licence is classed as permitted development. This contrasts with Exempt Organisations which, like The Caravan Club, will apply the highest standards to their sites, but which do not require a Site Licence. However they have to go through the process and expense of applying for planning permission for all physical development (including provision of services, toilets and washing facilities). To easily remedy this disadvantage, we suggest that Part 5, Class B should additionally apply to an Exempt Organisation.

2.3.4 This solution would mean The Caravan Club and other Exempted Organisations would not have to obtain planning permission for development on their own sites, but more particularly this would make life considerably easier and less expensive for Certificated Location owners at a time when the costs and burden of regulations are causing the number of CLs to reduce – thus negatively impacting rural economies.

*Recommendation*

i) That the Good Practice Guide for Tourism be reintroduced, updated if needed, to provide clear guidance for tourism businesses and local authorities.

ii) That Schedule 2, Part 5, Class B of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 be amended to include Exempted Organisations (under the 1960 Act).

### 2.4 Infrastructure/broadband

2.4.1 Many tourism businesses, including Caravan Club sites, cannot access broadband speeds that are commonly acknowledged to be necessary to run a business. In addition visitors including those staying on Caravan Club sites increasingly expect a decent mobile signal as well as broadband coverage to access information when they are away from home. As more importance is placed on ‘digital content’ by tourism bodies, visitors need to be able to access that content, as well as engage on social media, communicate with friends/family and so on.

2.4.2 As a forward-looking organisation we are trying to deliver staff training, video learning and communications across our sites network. We are also trying to meet our visitors’ (members and non-members) increasing demands by providing a wifi service that meets their needs, which sees a rapidly increasing demand for more bandwidth. We would like to deliver 1mb upload/500kb download speeds to each pitch, across what could be up to 200 pitches in use on a single site at any one time. However, some of our sites see only 1mb delivered across the whole site!

2.4.3 We would like to see improved information to understand the plan for rural fibre. Each quarter The Club scans availability by postcode, but little seems to be changing. Even
when it is available, the costs of installation may not be financially viable because of excessive infrastructure costs.

2.4.4 Members and visitors are increasingly unwilling to stay on sites without reliable wifi, thus leading to reduced business revenue and lack of capital investment. In turn, this has a tremendous knock-on effect on the local tourism economy, obviously a key dependency for many rural areas.

**Recommendation**

vii) That the roll-out of usable superfast broadband to rural areas is prioritised and the plan is communicated to rural businesses.

*September 2016*