Written evidence submitted by Living on the Edge (RUT0219)

an informal but constituted body committed to supporting the people of the two Hadrian’s Wall villages: Gilsland & Greenhead to remain viable and perhaps improve quality of life. Our nearest town in Haltwhistle, 5 miles away. We are on the edge of two spectacular counties, Northumberland & Cumbria, the Northumberland National Park, the North Pennines AONB, in easy reach of the Lakes and the Border country, and, consequently, while in theory perfectly positioned to host thousands of eager tourists, we are far from the centre of everything as far as decisions and promotion are concerned.

I have spent the last 40-odd years learning about the people and place where I live. I've been secretary of the sheep show, and have helped to set up and establish the village hall, the various tourism associations, the Tyne Valley Rail Users Group, the South Tyne Sustainability group, Living on the Edge and the Campaign to Open Gilsland Station. I started and ran the farmers’ market for 10 years and served on two LEADER panels of 5 years each in the North Pennines and the Northumberland Uplands. Always unpaid. These have given me both a bird’s eye and a worm’s eye view of rural development over many decades and I believe qualify me to offer my experience; my age means I will not bother to mince my words.

Background

Executive summary:

1. **Can tourism possibly flourish in run-down, decaying communities?** The relationship between successful sustainable tourism in small rural communities and the vitality of those communities must begin to be accepted by Government and an end be made to the devastation.
2. **Positive and successful interventions in recent years:** the Pennine Way; footpaths policies; the Hadrian’s Wall status as World Heritage Site; the National Trail and the Hadrian’s Cycleway; The National Park developments - Dark Skies Park and The Sill; the LEADER programmes 1997 - 20013; the North Pennines AONB; their effects and associated problems.
3. **The threats to that vitality in recent years:** marketing chaos; withdrawal of funding for the WHS; cuts to National Park budgets; disappearance of buses, post offices, schools, libraries, tourist information outlets, abattoirs, petrol stations, banks, magistrates courts, police stations, pubs, chapels, public toilets, funding to complete the Cycleway; abandonment of LEADER principles 2014 - 2020; unsuitable housing developments without infrastructure provision; lack of sports fields, and arts facilities; increased car traffic on narrow roads with many bends; failure of LEPs to notice or address rural communities’ needs …
4. **Local food** - how this is struggling to become integrated into local tourism
5. **local communities** - the effect of tourism on them; the benefits of the LEADER method; LEPs
6. **What would help from local & national government:** rural-proofing of legislation & regulations; real support for local food producers; dangers of numbers; bottom-up planning;

Our submission

1. **Rural communities far from the south-east.** We have been told officially for decades that the only hope for us in this area is tourism (our mines, quarries & factories have all disappeared).
The countryside is splendid and the native people entertaining. Sustainable tourism is the obvious aim. Obviously we want our visitors to return or to recommend this area to their friends. But what makes a successful holiday is not just the scenery - the memorable visits are those where we are happily conscious of spending time within a lively and flourishing community. In Holland, every house & fence looks as if it was painted yesterday. Here, so much is closed or run down or doesn’t work, or smells. Public buildings of every kind are either boarded up or have been converted into houses. Our facilities are a disgrace. This area is typically where money is saved by all levels of government because they rightly assess the number of voters to be insignificant. Yet tourists actually need transport, post offices, banks, shops and some measure of convenience, especially the people who come here on their feet or on their bicycles. If tourism in rural areas like ours, far from the south-east, is to succeed, the devastation of those rural areas must be reversed. You can not expect visitors to enjoy the conditions that are inflicted on rural people. But this will require a complete change in official thinking.

2. **The effects of designated areas.** The structure is here, listed above, from the WHS right down to the smallest fingerpost, but it needs maintenance and it needs to engage the local people very much more than currently happens, if it is to be effective in contributing to development and to making happy visitors. **The WHS** is the prime example of what happens when something is set up and then left to work without continuing interest and support. There is no doubt that the national & international classicists care about our section of the Roman Frontiers. The original team on the ground were young and keen and made themselves known to every farmer along the Wall, they knew where the teapot lived and listened to their worries. Then a superior outfit was substituted and established in the nicest possible offices many miles away from the Wall; they had grand titles and dreamt up amazing schemes to bring thousands of visitors, costing millions and implemented at the height of the lambing season, in the dark, without any consultation with the tenant farmers and without telling any local people who might have been interested to see what was going on. A classic example of how not to do it. All the work previously done with hundreds of local schoolchildren and their parents completely ignored and wasted. Government funding seems non existent and responsibility for the Site (which includes the land 10 miles to the north & to the south) has been left with multiple local authorities. We are now left with a skeleton staff, the Trail needs work and the AD122 bus along the Wall no longer reaches either city at the ends of the Wall and is never sure of repeat funding. At tourist fairs on the continent the message is simple - “we would love to see the Wall but couldn’t manage without transport.” We would like the Government to be proud of its major WHS and to wake up to the third obligation they have: as well as Access to and Conservation of the Site, custodians of a WHS have to ensure it contributes to the prosperity of the native population. We would remind you that this does **not** mean solely the accommodation providers, who are far too often incomers with the money to buy up local housing, but means the original inhabitants. **The National Park’s Dark Skies efforts have been success does strike a cord with local people and we are tremendously proud of the Kielder Observatory. This now hugely successful business was funded at various stages through the LEADER programme in the Northumberland Uplands which involved local people identifying projects for EU grants and was just one of many that showed the value of entrusting development to the local people rather than the experts. Tourism was just one of the themes of the development work of the NU LAG which worked very hard with young people in the area who are our future and are rarely provided for in any way by other official bodies. The Park’s major new project, The Sill, has split the local community, and will not help to bring prosperity back to Haltwhistle as it is sited on the Wall, but efforts were made to involve local people in the planning. It will find it extremely difficult to succeed in its aims of drawing
visitors into the whole Park area as there is no public transport to reach the communities in the Park. The AONB works well with local people and has a very positive approach to sustainable tourism in its almost unknown area but has also been subject to savage financial cuts and of course there is no public transport. A good example is the development of small businesses using local wool and the events held to promote these, as well as its cherishing of traditional hayfields full of wild flowers. The unrecognised problem with all of this good work, and with the marketing of the area, such as it is, is of course, What happens to the “thousands’ of people all these bodies are intended to bring into the area and how can it benefit them or their hosts to bring them here? They need provisioning, beds, and appropriate clothes at the least and they need them in some proximity. Wild countryside may be beautiful in the photographs taken on a day of brilliant sunshine but can terrify the unaccustomed visitor who has arrived to “Walk the Wall” in light sandals and a skimpy outfit.

3. Marketing. Prospective visitors who are bombarded by television advertising may assume a holiday involves heat and bronzed bodies. They need to be prepared for mud, icy winds and long stretches of countryside with not a single building in sight, as well as basic education in the necessity to close gates behind them. We have lost count of the various marketing bodies established to promote tourism here, but note the increasing youth and lack of experience of successive batches of the professionals drafted in with diminishing budgets and a computer on a desk in the city. The result of the computer work is a focus almost exclusively on the larger tourism attractions - the Lakes, Alnwick Gardens, Durham cathedral. None of our promoting people has a brief or the instinct to discover the many delights that we can offer or our need for attracting families and couples for stays longer than one night. It is assumed that our providers are simply there to put up the walkers & cyclists overnight. “Hadrian’s Wall” gets a single sentence as something somewhere near the pleasures of Newcastle! This is probably sensible as it is impossible, literally, to get to the Wall sites, by public transport from the cities - which rules out a lot of day visits. The Carlisle City Council is consistently embarrassed by people arriving at Carlisle Station and asking the way to the Wall. This one-night-stay for passers-through walking the Trail is of course seasonal and these businesses are therefore precarious which means they are rarely able to provide employment for local people. Seasonality also affects the local shops filled with tourist bling that are closed up in the winter leaving local people to trail to supermarkets many miles away. The Heart of Hadrian’s Wall Tourism Association has been formed by local tourism businesses to fill the marketing gap left by the various manifestations of Northumbrian Tourism but, being run by volunteers who are working flat out all through the season, it is not as effective as it should be. The delights of rural tourism are many - we have been working on a very varied Gilsland the Destination package which would attract the various members of the family. But it is not for the universal market and it needs marketing wisely and knowledgeably.

4. Local food. The B&B breakfasts and the pubs and tea rooms should all be providing local food as that is what our fields are full of - but the infrastructure for a flourishing local produce system is missing. We need a central small abattoir at Haltwhistle as transport costs to the few remaining abattoirs are prohibitive for small producers - a very promising free-range pig business on Hadrian’s Wall had to be abandoned to the sorrow of the farmers’ market customers who loved their prize-winning Roman-recipe sausages. The small struggling farmers’ market at Greenhead is the only one in the whole of the National Park area. There is really excellent local produce and much willingness to cooperate but little of it reaches the majority of tourists - and it needs to become the staple of local residents if the producers are to weather the winter low season.

5. How local communities are surviving. The unattractive results of the general stripping from the whole area of facilities and amenities listed above can be easily imagined, and the young
and the old are the main sufferers. Young people in the rural areas are not reluctant to seek out wholesome activities under their own steam, but our roads have now become too dangerous for them to travel from the villages because of the number of cars and the twisty roads - it may seem a small point, but we do need to keep our young. Tourists too are at risk if they venture on the roads on cycles. It’s delightful for the visitor to drive along leafy lanes between big hedges or stone walls but they keep the local kids at bay! We have tried hard to keep our communities alive through projects all of which need grants, in spite of all that has been taken from us, and the LEADER programmes were essential for this. As the whole thing was “bottom up” it worked far better than any of the other grant schemes that are so prescriptive and “top down” and waste huge amounts of time and energy and hope in competitive bidding etc. We have had c. £2million of EU money (and the match funding we can garner which often exceeds this) to spend on projects which have made a real difference to communities and small businesses in ways which we know will be of benefit. The spin-offs have been often unexpected and extraordinarily successful. This is in marked contrast to many “top down” ideas imposed on us. Sadly, not only did Defra waste a whole year of the current programme in order to introduce an unusable set of forms, it threw out all the LEADER principles and demanded an entirely “top down” set of objectives. If there is any money left after all the other claimants who will be losing European financial support in the years to come have received British Government support, for disadvantaged real areas, it would be good if the 7 LEADER principles were reinstated as that money would only then be well spent. The LEPs were, I think, meant to follow the “bottom up” principle for regional development but sadly they have wallowed in inaction for many years and never got round to thinking about the rural areas, probably because their remit was too large.

6. So what do we want to suggest to help turn things around? Above all, we would hope that Defra would ensure that every scrap of legislation and very new regulation emanating from all parts of Government be tested for applicability to the people as well as the environment in remote rural areas. In the current state of public amenities, we cannot comply with all sorts of prescriptive notions, e.g. an unemployed lad living up a valley 60 miles from the nearest Job Centre simply cannot present himself there from 9 to 5 without public transport unless he makes himself homeless! We need our villages to present themselves to the view of strangers with a full range of age groups. We need help with marketing but it must be sensitive and practical. It would be good to see an end to the thinking that numbers are the sole measure of success - the National Trail brings thousands of people through our area every year most attempting to “do” the Wall in 5 days. The hope is that they will be intrigued by what they have glimpsed and will return at more leisure. Some do. But the walkers up on the Trail rarely see the villages, they often only see the ground under their feet; when the blisters bite, they only see indistinctly through their tears, and if they can’t find any transport home in an emergency they are in despair. Local people are usually the only good thing they remember as they are unfailingly helpful and kind. Local good food needs to be the highlight of any visit to our area. An abattoir at Haltwhistle would definitely help the farmers who want to supply this. Local food is provided mostly by small farms (larger ones generally sell to a larger national market) and yet financial support is largely targeted at the bigger farms. Support for small farms providing food locally would be a great help both to them to them and the food outlets that rely on them – including those that sell to tourists. These small farms are those most likely to uphold both the character of the area and have least impact on the natural environment, features which make them most attractive to tourists. Furthermore, anything that can be done to reduce the red tape involved in producing food on a small farm for a local market would be welcomed. In particular, changes in regulations which would allow local abattoirs to be economically viable again would benefit both the local small farming and food
economy and the welfare of animals, currently subjected to long and arduous journeys due to many local abattoir closures. All grants and planning should be “bottom up” - trust the people on the spot. Local councils need to start to value their small isolated communities - in fact, a general resolution to operate on the basis of cause-and effect and common sense rather than numbers and ideologies would start to make a success even or rural tourism.

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