1.1 The subregion

1.1.1 Rural tourism makes significant contributions to the overall economy of the Marches area, which stretches from the Mid Welsh borders with Shropshire and Herefordshire to the west, across to Telford and Stafford to the east, and points north. Visitors are not only attracted by natural landscapes, industrial history, and market towns but also by heritage sites, a range of accommodation, quality local food and drink, arts and music festivals including V Festival at Weston Park on the border with Staffordshire, and outdoor activities such as canoeing, horse-riding, walking, and visits to working farms.

1.1.2 Attractions include the Rivers Severn and Wye, the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the two World Heritage Sites of the Ironbridge Gorge in the Severn Valley and the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct carrying the Llangollen Canal; the county towns of Hereford, Ross-on-Wye and Shrewsbury; National Trust and English Heritage properties, town and country parks; Herefordshire cider and perry, EU Protected Food Names; Ludlow Food Festival; Shrewsbury Folk Festival; the Mortimer Trail in Herefordshire; and Offas’s Dyke walking country.

1.1.3 It can be difficult to assess the true economic impact of rural tourism, as it covers disparate elements and as visitors themselves cross geographical boundaries with a literal view of the landscape rather than of local authority boundaries and of the variety of inputs by local bodies. For example, Shropshire is promoted by the private sector led marketing organisation Shropshire Tourism, which has 400 member businesses, in addition to a number of area based local tourism associations and groups, whilst the local authority endeavours to act as an enabler eg funding advice. Herefordshire has three tourism bodies: EatSleepLive Herefordshire; the Sustainable Food and Tourism Partnership supported by the Bulmer Foundation; and VisitHerefordshire.

1.1.4 This collegiate response for the sub region is an illustration of continued efforts towards an inclusive partnership approach to policy areas such as rural tourism, whereby the private, public and community and voluntary sectors seek to work together through strategic bodies such as the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the two Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) for the area, as well as through collaborative working on initiatives such as LEADER projects.

1.1.5 Ongoing liaison has already identified issues previously shared with Government Departments and parliamentary committees, notably the Digital Economy, rural productivity, and skills challenges. This opportunity to share perspectives from the sub-region with the EFRA Select Committee is very much welcomed. We look forward to being of any further assistance to help illustrate the points that we make.

1.2 The challenges

1.2.1 The practical challenges identified for the sub-region and its linkages with the rest of England and with Wales in tourism terms major upon co-operation, co-ordination, and physical and digital connectivity.

1.2.2 The policy challenges are accordingly seen as being around people policy and financial policy with a focus on digital skills, mentoring, and business sustainability advice alongside start-up support, and around use of environmental and planning policy to strengthen infrastructure whilst protecting and enhancing the rural environment itself.

1.2.3 It should come as little surprise, therefore, that the key recommendations for the Committee to consider alongside the practical and policy challenges to raise with Government are in relation to the role of Defra.

1.3 The recommendations
1.3.1 In an overall recommendation about its Department-specific role, it is felt that Defra should take the lead in ensuring three things:

- Facilitating greater co-ordination of effort through LEPs, including overseeing requirements for establishment of tourism structures, to enable consideration of rural tourism as a driver for economic and rural growth, and working with LEPs to ensure funding applications are as streamlined as possible;
- Encouraging more coordination between local businesses;
- Resourcing LNPs alongside more use made of them as an all-England resource, and strengthened strategic linkages between the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission, Historic England and Natural England.

1.3.2 Strategic linkages would usefully include stronger recognition of what heritage-based tourism has to offer in terms of the rural economy and regeneration, for example through the current City of Culture 2021 Bid for Hereford, which has far reaching potential, whilst greater integration between rural tourism and the Countryside Stewardship schemes offered to farmers and land managers from Natural England would: “...enable the environmental gains being achieved through these schemes to become more integrated with the rural economy as a whole, and also potentially provide greater public benefits for the tax payer.” – Dr Andy Wigley, Shropshire Council Natural & Historic Environment Manager

1.3.3 A clear Defra lead as described above would for example help the Marches sub region to realise the opportunities presenting themselves, particularly through marketing the environment and landscape, locking the region’s location into people’s minds, as has been achieved with for example the Lakes, and as per one of our leading tourism experts: “...make the region seem nearer than it is in people’s mental maps and more accessible” - Katie Foster

1.4 **The opportunities identified**

- Environmental and landscape tie ins: emphasise landscapes and themes rather than boundaries; emphasise discovering landscapes eg where battles were won, or where families can play together; use what the area is already known for, eg here the Severn Valley historic landscape,
- Online presence encompassing high calibre websites; and links with local authority, LEP and Government websites;
- Better use of social media, encouraging attractions and facilities to recognise and make more use of online customer feedback, eg use of TripAdvisor, Booking.com etc,
- Targeted research into visitor expectations, anticipated holiday outlays and satisfaction levels;
- Food trail and attraction trail creation and upkeep, potentially linked to increase in EU Protected Food Names;
- Cultural events, fairs and festival tie-ins;
- Sporting and historical tie ins, linked to eg athletics events, family participation events such as parkruns, historical re-enactments, horse riding and walking routes;
- Built historic tie ins; opportunities to make more of locations and extend visits to encompass several attractions. A potential case study is Oswestry historic border market town: ‘A’ road access; events at Oswestry Showground; the old railway; British Ironworks; Iron Age Hill Fort; shops, restaurants and pubs; Park Hall Farm for families; and location close to Pontcysyllte Aqueduct World Heritage Site (WHS), Llangollen Canal and North Shropshire canals, and quarries with wildlife and biodiversity.

2.0 **Key lines of enquiry**

2.1 **Marketing:**

a.) **Question: how well do agencies promote rural destinations across England?**
2.1.1 The views of respondents make clear that a different and more co-ordinated approach is needed to help rural destinations with limited resources, and that generic albeit positive imagery of rural England is not in itself a sufficient draw. A factor, also cited by a Shropshire accommodation provider, was that: “Rural destinations are poorly represented, due in a large degree to the nature of rural tourism businesses, being small, often family run concerns, very often diversifications from core rural industries such as farming.”

2.1.2 A Herefordshire response was that: “The charm of many rural places is in their relative isolation; notwithstanding that there is the chance to: “Make the most of the fact that there are no big name celebrities and instead emphasise tranquillity.” – Clare Fildes, Outdoor Partnerships Enterprise Manager, Shropshire Council.

2.1.3 National agencies will in the words of one respondent tend to lead their rural marketing with “the obvious attack brands such as the Lake District, Dartmoor and the Peak District”, whilst others reinforced this with comments that outside of the National Parks, the agencies are seen to do very little: one respondent from Herefordshire commented that: “Countryfile does a better job”.

2.1.4 A further challenge identified is that a high quality and tranquil environment does not of itself directly return an income unlike for example museums. The Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust response concurs with this view and reinforces points made by others around using themes rather than diffusing effort, commenting on a disconnect between national and local agencies leading to campaign messages being weakened and confused. A lack of local coordination can be further hindered by a lack of dedicated and knowledgeable staffing resource, albeit good examples exist, such as Oswestry Borderland Tourism, which runs a visitor centre in partnership with Oswestry Town Council.

2.1.5 The Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust also commented that: “More focus could be given on how to enjoy a rural break with focus on the heritage and culture that can often be enjoyed whilst visiting. The National Trust have clearly understood the importance of this.”

b.) Question: what more should the Government do to support this work?

2.1.6 Whilst rural tourism is of fundamental importance to the rural economy, there remains a real concern expressed that DCMS, as lead government department, is failing to understand the nature of the countryside and the needs of rural tourism operators. In a Department-specific role, DCMS should be taking the lead in ensuring that practical support is identified to help those who manage heritage assets and those who run tourism businesses to acquire and make effective use of digital upskilling and events and hospitality skills, whether small B&Bs, country pubs, or providers of heritage trails, etc.

2.1.7 Comments included a view that: “They should get out there and find out what is actually happening on the ground. There should be more incentives for the people involved in tourism...These people can feel alone in what they do with only the guests’ reactions to sustain them. One can feel very overlooked and forgotten.”

2.1.8 Respondents have also commented, as has the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), that grant schemes are often over complex and bureaucratic, leading to operators failing to take advantage despite the fact that a grant could turn a promising rural tourism business into a very profitable one, whilst the Discover England Fund has been perceived as appearing divorced from other funding mechanisms.

2.1.9 Cross-Departmentally, Government should help coordinate and promote the numerous small-scale attractions, which add up to “one very big attraction” - Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT), and facilitate working groups for rural destinations throughout the UK to work together on marketing projects. An example would be support by all key Departments for the Defra Great British Food Campaign, as a national campaign that can be adapted at local level.

2.1.10 In a Department-specific role, Defra should itself take the lead in ensuring three things:
facilitating greater coordination of effort through LEPs,
• encouraging more co-ordination between local businesses;
• more resourcing for LNPs alongside more use made of them as a resource that covers England.

2.2 Access:  

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

2.2.1 The primary issue may be seen as one of intellectual access – knowledge and confidence to walk/cycle etc. This requires better support for information and interpretation – everything from directional signs to telling the stories of the countryside via websites, leaflets, guided walks and visitor centres and training for tourism businesses so they know what is available locally.

2.2.2 Visitors increasingly wish to access the internet throughout the day as well as make and receive mobile phone calls. Rural tourism businesses need easy access to the internet for business and marketing purposes. A Herefordshire business made the comment that the WiFi code is one of the first things a guest asks for as they walk in the door. Shropshire Council staff, meanwhile, gave views as visitors to daytime attractions that may form part of longer stays for out of county visitors.

2.2.3 Recommendations about digital media:
• Enhance online marketing and social media role: encourage networks, attractions and facilities to recognise and make more use of online feedback such as TripAdvisor; encourage activity to input quality photographs eg of Shropshire online, including Getty Images and other photographic resource libraries, to raise profile.
• Optimise integration between online websites, social media and other digital media, eg to alert visitors to attractions, aid physical access to specific sites and point to complementary facilities such as restaurants and accommodation
• Government to facilitate broadband and mobile coverage: “There is an obvious need for good quality digital infrastructure to support the Tourism sector across the Marches. Decisions to visit the Marches are now predicated on whether visitors will be able to use their digital devices whilst on business or holidaying.” - Chris Taylor, Connecting Shropshire Programme Manager;

2.2.4 Recommendations about physical access:
• Improve use of signage, including more flexibility from the Highways Agency to permit brown sign usage to point to attractions, eg along A49 in Shropshire;
• Encourage businesses to develop and promote walking and cycling from the door to local towns, villages and attractions;
• Develop integrated physical transport options and routes including cycling routes, bridleways and canals: “Actually having footpaths open and accessible (rather than blocked by barbed wire, waste or badly maintained hedges) would be a great start – Herefordshire Respondent;
• Develop product and access guides for people with different needs to provide the reassurance that they will be able to access services relative to those needs, eg
  o Adult changing facilities
  o Wheelchair access
  o Dog friendly facilities
  o Family friendly facilities- older people have particular needs as well as babies and children
• Publicise access options through online platforms, local information centres, physical information boards within localities and in urban locations as part of promotion and orientation for visitors

2.3. Funding and fiscal policies:
a.) **Question:** how can public funding be best targeted to get new rural tourist businesses off the ground and keep them going?

2.3.1 The Marches area would like to see better and more coordinated use of funding, whether through agencies, projects such as the “Great Places” funding, or campaigns such as the new Great British Food Campaign. This would ideally involve dedicated local coordinator roles, to build local working relationships and link with strategic partnership arrangements ie LEPs, LNPs, and devolution bodies such as Combined Authorities.

2.3.2 One way suggested would be to ensure use of models like LEADER to provide small grants to both tried-and-tested business models and innovative ideas. There then needs to be sharing of lessons learnt between businesses and, crucially, the funder. LEADER should be more able to fund infrastructure/networking/co-ordination activity that benefits more than one business.

2.3.3 Funding is seen to focus on creating jobs, which can be an unrealistic expectation for an accommodation provider such as a B&B, or on supporting start ups, when it would be beneficial to support gradual expansion and improvements of existing small rural businesses, for example through quality controlled and defined marketing.

2.3.4 “It is NOT always about funding BUT the willingness to work together. An experienced Mentor would be beneficial in many ways to provide advice on tax, accountancy, branding and marketing.” – Herefordshire respondent

b.) **Question:** are changes needed to tax levels and business rates?

2.3.5 Careful thought needs to be given to equity of funding of all things rural including rural tourism, to facilitate a level playing field between rural and more urban areas. The recent CCN-commissioned report by Pixar Management provides timely evidence of the complexities.

2.3.6 Respondents have also commented that VAT on tourism products, at 20%, makes the hospitality business uncompetitive, and compares unfavourably with European destinations. One query was whether business rates could perhaps depend on the type of business, with an assertion that in France the bakeries pay less in rates than higher margin businesses. VAT is seen as an issue for small tourism business as income is generated within summer months and can fluctuate dramatically by month according to outside pressures e.g. exchange rate/ American perception of terrorist activity - which even affects small rural businesses. Some might be in VAT threshold for one month or even drop out from year to year, with resultant additional administration and costs.

2.3.7 Changes to business rates for rural businesses would it is felt also be helpful; the comment on larger rural businesses is that they are taxed as if they were in towns and enjoyed full local amenities.

2.3.8 Another issue is that whilst grants to help set up decent websites/training and help with marketing are needed, if the business cannot maintain itself, then additional funds will not help. Tax regimes should be helpful to businesses who run a number of small jobs in one household in order to keep going, which is a common practice in rural areas.

2.3.9 **Key recommendations:**

- Devolve management and administration of funding to within regions and counties;
- Provide expert advice and funding at start up;
- Encourage mentoring support;
- Support existing businesses to refresh and grow their offering;
• Change VAT and business rates.

2.4. **Planning and regulation:**

*Question: 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?*

2.4.1 The Shropshire Wildlife Trust has commented that the overall landscape character of an area adds significant value to tourism businesses and visitor attractions, whilst Herefordshire respondents have commented that AONBs should be included along with National Parks in considerations of sustainable rural tourism, with references to the need to balance the needs of tourism and nature with agriculture.

2.4.2 Dr Andy Wigley has commented that it would be of benefit to see a review of the effectiveness and impact of the extension of permitted development rights to promote the conversion of rural buildings to housing. This is on the grounds that whilst this has been aimed at increasing housing in rural areas, the lack of planning control potentially pose a significant threat to rural built heritage and wider landscape character if such schemes are carried out insensitively. As such, this could very well work against the promotion of rural tourism by introducing incongruous and insensitive development into the countryside.

2.4.3 **Key recommendations:**

- Recognise the importance of landscape encompassing AONB, nature reserves and NIAs like the Meres and Mosses in northern Shropshire, beyond perceived national focus on National Parks;
- Review the effectiveness and impact of the extension of permitted development rights to promote the conversion of rural buildings to housing.

2.5. **Infrastructure and skills:**

*a.)* **Question: what measures are needed to ensure transport, housing and other infrastructure meets visitor needs?**

2.5.1 An “ask” of Government to recognise the need for flexibility as well as autonomy in devolution of powers such as those around transport to county authorities could be of real assistance to rural authorities. For example, whilst there has been a long term strategic ambition to increase the numbers of visitors arriving in the Shropshire area without a car, bus links have not provided incentive to make this happen. The rail network is heavily influenced by the needs of Welsh neighbours. Links with London have improved in the last two years but the frequency of the timetable at two trains a day may be said to leave much to be desired.

2.5.2 Local authority budget cuts to public transport services in the next few years will potentially make it ever more difficult to encourage visitors to make much of a modal shift in their travel patterns. These cuts have been highlighted as concerns by accommodation providers across Herefordshire and Shropshire.

2.5.3 It has been commented that visitors are surprised at lack of bus services, poor WiFi and poor mobile networks: these are accepted as the norm, so they find it difficult to cope without these. Shropshire Council staff gave views as visitors to local daytime attractions, whilst commenting on austerity as a real consideration for length of domestic stays.

2.5.4 Research on expectations as well as on satisfaction levels could prove a useful local tool, perhaps through the Marches LEP, including consideration of austerity issues for visitors as well as for operators, agencies and local authorities. This may range from the practical - the rise of the packed lunch and the day trip – to the pragmatic – a lack of time to wait for buses and connection, a lack of inclination to develop one’s own package trip or local trail.
2.5.5 **Key recommendations:**

- Government investment in upgrading and signage that promotes routes and development of off road, all ability multi-user routes;
- Improve road, footpath and trail conditions; cut back hedgerow and tree overhangs; minimise road works during holiday periods; incentivise farmers and locals to keep footpaths clear open to encourage locals and guests to use them more;
- Develop schemes to promote sensitive and sustainable conversion of redundant traditional rural buildings to holiday accommodation. Comparators include the Gite de France programme, initiated as a rural regeneration scheme by French government.

b.) **Question: how can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?**

2.5.6 SWT has commented that: “Tourism businesses (B&Bs etc) are key in guiding visitors in interesting things to do. This assumes they know what’s out there, or have the time to find out.” This is a key recommendation from the Marches, corroborating other comments around local coordination of effort and sharing of knowledge, with the environment sector suggested as a good way to begin spreading best practice and understanding the needs of the entire visitor economy.

2.5.7 **Key recommendations:**

- Improve people resources: encourage upskilling and mentoring of people involved in tourism, including usage of digital media, alongside recognition of the roles that volunteers can play to maximise the tourism offer and to safeguard and enhance the natural and historic landscape. Include incentivising volunteers and ensuring that all inputs meet quality standards eg photographs.
- Promote orientation and discover events run by those who manage heritage assets, to ensure knowledge of the rural heritage offer is available for rural tourism promoters
- Support young people wishing to acquire traditional building skills in rural areas
- Address low pay issue and skills gaps across the entire rural economy, eg through skills audits

2.6. **Local environment and character:**

**Question: how can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?**

2.6.1 Shropshire Council staff commented on the lack of a single big family attraction, such as an Alton Towers, and on the importance of: “a range of activities and facilities for all weathers”; with this in mind, marketing again emerges as key to enhancing the environment, ie landscapes and outdoors activities, including improvements to road access and parking where public transport continues to be limited or simply not an option that people wish to take.

2.6.2 Shropshire Wildlife Trust has commented on the: “…continuing severe decline in the quality of Shropshire’s natural environment (as evidenced by massive losses in the diversity of plant species between the publication of Shropshire Floras in 1985 and 2015). While the countryside remains superficially “green” there will soon be more wildlife in towns than the countryside. Reversing this trend requires strong integrated and long-term environmental, agricultural, planning and river policies.”

2.6.3 Comments have also been made about the need to encourage green tourism practices, perhaps through payments for ecosystem services, suggested by dan Wrench as coordinator for the Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin LNP, and greater PR coverage to organisations with sustainability policies.

2.6.4 The ability of the countryside to absorb and recover from disasters, whether natural or man-made in causality, requires continued collection of evidence eg of water quality and water supply status, and of
volume of human traffic, allied to consideration of such evidence in planning policy decisions around new housing development.

2.6.5 Key recommendations:

- Emphasise landscapes and themes, and use what areas are already known for eg Offa’s Dyke and the English and Welsh Marches;
- Encourage green tourism practices, including payment for ecosystem services like a penny on a locally brewed pint to pay for footpath maintenance;
- Support development of a range of activities and facilities for all weathers.

2.7. Defra role:

Question: What more should Defra do to ensure government departments support rural tourism?

2.7.1 Key recommendations:

- Provide encouragement and leadership through liaison with DCMS on the development of digital policy as it affects rural tourism, given common agreement with the view of the CLA, “Digital connectivity and available broadband is now a key requisite for any rural tourism business and strengthening the digital presence is referenced in the DCMS 5 point plan”.

- Co-ordinate and lead tourism efforts across borders, demonstrating recognition of natural and historic landscapes and use of themes such as local food, allied to longer term thinking, to redress the perception of England in rural tourism terms as: “the poor relation of Scotland and Wales” – Shropshire Council focus group.

- Adopt the key recommendations for Defra made from the Marches subregion, seen as being of such significance that they are cited as the overall recommendation and are accordingly placed front of this submission.

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