Written evidence submitted by Campaign for National Parks (RUT0226)

Executive Summary

- National Parks make an important contribution to rural tourism. There are currently 90 million visitors to England’s 10 National Parks each year, spending over £4 billion.

- The Government wants to increase the annual number of visitors to 100 million but changes are needed if more people are to visit these beautiful areas whilst also ensuring that the high quality environment in National Parks continues to be protected and enhanced for future generations to enjoy.

- In particular, significant improvements are needed to public transport, especially bus services, to ensure that people can access these areas without having to rely on a car. High volumes of traffic already have a negative impact on the tranquillity and natural environment in parts of our National Parks.

- The Government should commit to long-term revenue support for bus services in National Parks and other rural areas, in recognition of the wider benefits they provide to individuals, local economies and the environment.

- It is also essential to ensure that National Park Authorities have sufficient resources to support visitor centres all year round, particularly if the Government wishes to succeed in its ambitions to extend the National Park tourist season and encourage more international visitors.

- National and local planning policies play an important role in balancing protection of the high quality environment with growing tourism in National Parks. The existing planning system supports sustainable tourism by ensuring that appropriate changes are allowed while continuing to protect the special qualities for which National Parks are valued and which contribute so much to the rural economy. The additional planning protection for National Parks must be maintained.

- Finally, Defra must act as a champion for sustainable tourism in National Parks and other rural areas across Government to ensure that the work of other departments supports rural tourism.

Introduction

1. The Campaign for National Parks is the independent national voice for the 13 National Parks in England and Wales. Our mission is to inspire everyone to enjoy and look after National Parks – the nation’s green treasures. For 80 years we have been campaigning to ensure that our National Parks are beautiful, inspirational places that
are relevant, valued and protected for all. We are happy for our evidence to be made publicly available.

2. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee on rural tourism in England. The Government’s [8-Point Plan for National Parks](#), published in March, highlights a key role for National Parks in driving growth in international tourism. The Plan aims to promote National Parks as world-class destinations to visitors from overseas and the UK and extend the National Parks tourist season. It also includes a target to increase the annual number of visitors to National Parks from 90 million to 100 million. We support these aspirations. Our evidence highlights the changes to government policies that are needed in order to enable more people to visit these beautiful areas whilst also ensuring that the high quality environment in National Parks continues to be protected and enhanced for future generations to enjoy.

Access

3. If more people are to be encouraged to visit National Parks then more needs to be done to ensure that people can access these areas without having to rely on a car. Nationally, a quarter of households do not have access to a car and rely on public transport for most of their journeys. While residents of National Parks generally have higher than average levels of car ownership, there is still a significant minority who do not have access to a car – 6% in the most rural areas – so improved public transport is also important in ensuring that those employed in tourism businesses in National Parks do not have to own a car in order to be able to get to work.

4. High volumes of traffic already have a negative impact on the tranquillity, natural environment and visitor experience in some parts of our National Parks. In some places, high levels of tourist traffic on narrow unclassified roads can also have an adverse effect on farmers and other local businesses. Providing good public transport ensures that increased numbers of people can visit National Parks without damaging the special qualities for which these areas are valued or making the most popular sites within the Parks even more congested.

5. National Park Authorities (NPAs) are not local transport authorities (LTAs) but they do have a statutory responsibility to promote opportunities for public enjoyment and understanding of the Parks. They also generally have a good understanding of the travel needs of visitors in their area. In recent years, NPAs have played a key role in providing bus services for visitors many of which also provide a vital service for local residents which might not exist without the fare income from visitors. Examples include the [Breeze up to the Downs](#) network linking Brighton with the South Downs and the [Beach Bus](#) in the New Forest. There are also successful bus services in National Parks supported by local voluntary groups, such as [Dalesbus in the Yorkshire Dales](#).

6. To ensure such services can continue operating successfully in the future and to give more people better access to National Parks, the travel needs of both visitors and residents must be considered when planning any changes that affect bus routes in National Parks. The Government should ensure that the changes to the planning of bus services being introduced through the [Bus Services Bill](#) take account of the specific
needs of National Parks. There are further detail on the changes we would like to see in our briefing on the Bill\(^1\).

7. In addition, more needs to be done to support the use of rail, walking and cycling by visitors to National Parks. There are a number of rail stations in some National Parks but rail services are not always planned with the needs of visitors in mind. For example, they are often less frequent on a Sunday. To ensure that decisions support the use of rail by visitors to National Parks, NPAs should be statutory consultees on proposed changes to rail franchising, timetabling and routing. Local highway authorities, LEPs and NPAs should provide safe, enjoyable and sensitively designed cycling and walking facilities which meet the needs of both residents and visitors and provide links between National Parks and rail stations, other public transport interchanges and neighbouring towns.

8. While priority should be given to encouraging people to travel by alternatives, many visitors will still need to, or choose to, travel by car. Where they are needed, parking facilities should be designed to be sensitive to the local environment and charges should not be set so high that people choose to park in inappropriate locations to avoid the charge. In certain places, it may also be appropriate to restrict traffic in order to avoid damaging the special qualities of National Parks. For example, a section of the road in the Upper Derwent Valley in the Peak District is closed to all but disabled badge holders at certain times to protect the environment. The provision of large car parks, bicycle hire and a minibus service means the area is still accessible to all but the number of vehicles using the road is significantly reduced.

Marketing

9. If rural tourist businesses are to survive and thrive, then tourists need to be able to find out easily what is on offer in the area they are visiting. While many people now look for tourist information online, tourist information centres still play an important role in promoting the services and activities offered by local businesses. Those searching online generally need to be aware of the National Park and familiar with the kind of activities that are available in the area in order to be able to find the right information. Our work on introducing new audiences to National Parks through the Mosaic project identified that many found a physical space with someone they could talk to a more useful way of understanding how to access the Park and the activities on offer.

10. Marketing strategies and integrated ticketing initiatives should be used to encourage the use of sustainable transport by visitors and should be aimed at the users of both public and private transport. Accommodation and activity providers should be encouraged to offer discounts for public transport users, cyclists and walkers.

Funding

11. The significant cuts to NPA budgets experienced between 2010 and 2015 led to cuts to marketing and tourism spending in National Parks, including the closure of several

\(^1\) http://www.cnp.org.uk/transport/buses
tourist information centres. For example, the Broads Authority closed three of its six tourist information centres and Northumberland NPA closed two out of three visitor centres while in other places the opening hours of visitor centres were cut, particularly over the winter. We were very pleased that funding for National Parks was protected in last Autumn’s Spending Review. However, if the Government wishes to succeed in its ambition to promote National Parks as world-class destinations to visitors from the UK and overseas and to extend the National Park tourist season then it must ensure that NPAs have sufficient resources to support visitor centres all year round and to provide effective online marketing.

12. Extra resources will also be required if the other targets in the 8-Point Plan are to be achieved. For example, a significant increase in the numbers of visitors will result in the need for additional spending on the maintenance of footpaths, public lavatories and other facilities in National Parks. Consideration should also be given to how best visitors could be encouraged to visit those National Parks, and parts of National Parks, that are less popular at the moment but where the local economy would welcome and benefit from additional tourists.

13. There also needs to be more financial support for public transport and community-led transport initiatives in National Parks. Sadly the cuts to local authority budgets which had a devastating impact on the availability of bus services in many rural areas in recent years, mean that some National Parks such as Exmoor now have very limited bus services.

14. The Government published research earlier this year showing that supported bus services are very good value for money. They generate between £2 and £2.50 in benefits to local communities for every £1 of local authority spend as a result of improved access to work and leisure activities and reduced road congestion and carbon emissions. This is before some of the wider benefits such as increased spending in local tourism businesses are taken into account.

15. Other research has found that visitors travelling by public transport spend more money in tourist areas than those arriving by car. They are more likely to spend money on food and drink locally and are more likely to pay for tourist attractions. A recent survey of users of the Moorsbus service in the North York Moors found that they spent nearly £10 on average in local shops and cafes. In addition, it was estimated in 2011 that passengers on DalesBus Sunday and Bank Holiday services brought £187,000 worth of visitor spending to the Yorkshire Dales National Park. So, there are strong economic development arguments for investing in improved public transport for National Parks.

16. The Government should commit to long-term revenue support for bus services in National Parks and other rural areas, in recognition of the wider benefits they provide.

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3 MVA Consultancy in association with David Simmonds Consultancy, 2006, Evaluation of Rural Transport Provision (report for Lancashire Economic Partnership)
4 Personal communication from Moorsbus.
5 Dales Integrated Transport Alliance, 2011, Connecting the Dales Local Sustainable Transport Fund bid
to individuals, local economies and the environment. Other measures which would help support bus services in National Parks include:

- Ensuring local transport authorities include scheduled services to neighbouring National Parks in their concessionary fares reimbursement schemes.
- Allocating to National Park Authorities some of the funds from the transfer of Bus Services Operator Grant (BSOG) from operators to local authorities.
- Funding to support community led transport schemes and initiatives.

17. In addition, adequate funding should be provided to deliver a well maintained, signed and promoted public rights of way (PRoW) network. The key role that PRoWs play in supporting rural tourism was clearly demonstrated by the impact on the rural economy resulting from the closure of much of the network during the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001. Given their responsibility for promoting recreational opportunities, it would be logical for NPAs to take over responsibility for PRoWs in their area from the local highway authorities. This would also be consistent with the fact that NPAs are access authorities under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, something which we believe should be maintained.

**Planning and regulation**

18. The existing planning system already supports sustainable tourism in National Parks. These areas are afforded additional protection under the planning system and there is no evidence that the existing processes for managing development in National Parks are a barrier to growth or are deterring sustainable tourism.

19. In 2015 National Park Authorities granted approval for 89% of the planning applications they received compared to 87% for all English planning authorities. National Parks are living, working landscapes which must adapt over time but reducing planning regulation could actually damage the significant benefits they provide and have a negative impact on tourism. The existing planning system enables appropriate development but is still able to prevent inappropriate and/or unsustainable development.

20. More than half of businesses in National Parks believe that being in a National Park has a positive impact on their business. The local economy in many National Parks relies heavily on tourism and many visitors are specifically attracted to these areas by the natural beauty of the landscape. Many of the benefits which National Parks provide, including tourism and rural economic growth, could be lost if the special qualities for which they are valued are undermined.

21. The challenge is to ensure the range of benefits that protected landscapes provide is not compromised by insensitive change, unsympathetic land use or irresponsible development. In general, the existing planning system in National Parks is ensuring that appropriate changes are being allowed while continuing to protect the special qualities

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for which National Parks are valued and which contribute so much to the rural economy.

22. National and local planning policies play an important role in balancing the protection of the high quality environment with growing tourism in National Parks. This means it is often appropriate to treat National Parks differently in planning policy. We were very pleased that the Government included an exemption for National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) when it introduced permitted development rights for the conversion of agricultural buildings to residential use in 2014. We made a strong case for this exemption as without it there could have been a significant impact on the character and special qualities of National Park, particularly in places such as the Yorkshire Dales where there are around 4500 field barns many of which are in isolated locations. There are strong reasons for continuing to treat National Parks differently in order to ensure that inappropriate development does not detract from the local tourism economy.

23. We have some concerns about the permitted development rights that have been introduced to allow agricultural buildings to be converted to commercial uses. We are aware of examples where this has resulted in barns being converted into uses such as hotels and cafes leading to the urbanisation of very small rural settlements. One such example is a barn that has been converted into a hotel in Fryupdale in the North York Moors. We recognise the National Parks are living landscapes so some development is appropriate. But it is important that the NPAs are able to use the planning system to prevent development that would have a significant negative impact on the special qualities of the National Park and/or make these areas less attractive for people to visit.

24. We do not believe these permitted development rights should apply in National Parks but if they are to continue, thresholds or limitations should be applied to avoid the conversion of several buildings within a single farm complex and the subsequent cumulative impacts. Permitted development rights should be limited to one building in any farm complex and should be restricted to traditional buildings greater than a certain age as many modern agricultural buildings are less appropriate for conversion to other uses in any case.

25. Furthermore, in a number of National Parks there are major issues from legal but unsustainable use of recreational motorised vehicle users (RMVUs) on BOATs and unclassified green lanes. RMVUs can create conflict with other users and noise pollution, and damage routes, rendering them impassable to walkers, horse riders and cyclists. This is to the detriment of sustainable tourism. RMVUs causing damage to routes in National Parks harm National Park statutory purposes. Consideration needs to be given to preventing such damage; this may be through simplifying the process by which National Park Authorities can implement Traffic Regulation Orders or potentially a blanket ban of RMVUs on BOATs.

Infrastructure and skills

26. To meet visitor needs effectively, rural tourism businesses need to be able to employ people with the right skills and those people need to be able to live close to where they work. This means the Government needs to allow NPAs to continue to
adopt housing policies that meet locally identified needs. Such policies should seek to support the provision of the type of affordable housing that is most appropriate for local circumstances and to continue to use local occupancy restrictions which make it easier for local people to work and live in areas which would otherwise be unaffordable.

27. Measures should also be introduced to ensure that the providers of courses on tourism and hospitality cover rural tourism including issues specific to National Parks and that tourism is covered in rural skills training programmes.

**Defra role**

28. Defra should act as a champion for tourism in National Parks and other rural areas across other Government departments. This should include ensuring that other departments take their responsibilities to rural proof their policies seriously and ensuring that any changes to policy do not have unintended consequences for rural tourism.

29. The evidence we have set out above identifies some of the key areas where we believe that it will be essential for Defra to work closely with other Government departments in order to ensure that their work supports rural tourism. For example, they need to ensure that the Bus Services Bill and related changes meet the needs of National Parks and that the Department for Transport provides financial support for bus services in National Parks and other rural areas. Defra also needs to make a strong case to the Department for Communities and Local Government about the benefits of strong planning protection for rural tourism, particularly in areas such as National Parks which are valued for their high quality environment.

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