1. The Ramblers helps everyone, everywhere, enjoy walking and protects the places we all love to walk. We are the only charity dedicated to looking after paths and green spaces, opening up new places to explore and encouraging everyone to get outside and discover how walking boosts health and happiness. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Committee’s inquiry.

2. We agree that all parts of England have much to offer tourists, both foreign and domestic. This potential can be developed by improving access to the countryside, expanding the nation’s network of paths, trails and green spaces and better promoting these opportunities to visitors. Increased awareness and positive experiences will draw people to visit areas off the beaten track, benefitting local economies and the country as a whole.

3. We wish to comment on three areas of interest to the Committee: access, funding and fiscal policies, and infrastructure and skills.

Background

4. Visits to the natural environment in England have substantially increased. It was estimated that 42.3million adult residents visited green spaces on 2.93billion occasions during March 2013 to February 2014, of which 1.31billion were countryside locations.¹

5. The natural environment provides tourism benefits. A quarter of visits to the natural environment involved some form of expenditure, with people who visited less frequently than once a month more likely to incur expenditure (£35.30 on average per visit).² The average total spend per year by visitors to the natural environment may be estimated at £20 billion.³ In 2010, tourism provided 12.6% of employment and 10.2% of enterprises of all industries in rural areas.⁴ The Sport and Recreation Alliance’s recent report ‘Reconomics’ draws together much of the available evidence of the substantial economic benefits of outdoor recreation.⁵

6. Over three quarters of visits to the natural environment involved walking.⁶ In 2003, these walking trips to the English countryside were associated with £6billion expenditure a year, supporting up to 245,000 full time jobs.⁷ Since this report, both the England Coast Path and Open Access land have been extended, likely impacting

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¹ Natural England, Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment - Annual Report from the 2013-14 survey, 2015
³ Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment Analysis of expenditure during visits
⁴ Defra, Tourism Feature Report, 2011
⁵ The Sports and Recreation Alliance, Reconomics: the economic impact of outdoor recreation, 2014
⁷ Christie and Matthews, The Economic and Social Value of Walking in Rural England, 2003
the magnitude of this economic benefit associated with walking in countryside locations.

7. Good quality, well-promoted walking routes support local services and businesses, including shops, pubs and B&Bs. Visitors attracted by national trails, which tend to offer high quality experiences, benefit local tourism businesses.\(^8\) The 15 globally-renowned national trails in England and Wales attracts millions of people a year,\(^9\) bringing income into rural communities. They include:

- **South West Coast Path**: Currently the longest national trail in England at 630 miles, the path attracted 8.6 million users and a direct expenditure of £436 million in 2012 (a 14% increase on 2010 baseline\(^10\)), supporting 9,771 full-time equivalent jobs.\(^11\)
- **Hadrian’s Wall Path**: Opening in 2003, the path has brought £19 million to local communities.\(^12\)

8. In the UK, 18.2 million people who are currently not active want to participate in outdoor activity within the next 12 months.\(^13\) This highlights a latent opportunity; by providing more access and promotion of these opportunities, economic benefits to rural communities can be extended.

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

**(i) England Coast Path**

9. The English coastline is home to some of the country’s most spectacular natural scenery, but also to some of its most economically deprived communities.\(^14\) The Department for Communities and Local Government recognises that “Many seaside town and villages have suffered decades of economic decline... We need to invest in coastal towns to help their economies grow and reduce unemployment and deprivation”.\(^15\)

10. Natural England (NE) is currently establishing a 2,700 mile path around the entire English coastline, with work underway on 60% of the route.\(^16\) By linking the coast...

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\(^12\) The Sports and Recreation Alliance, *Reconomics: the economic impact of outdoor recreation*, 2014
\(^15\) DCLG, *Economic development in coastal and seaside areas*, accessed August 2016
path to business in communities, new sections of coastal access can provide economic benefits to rural areas.

11. As yet there are no economic figures attributable to the England Coast Path as only eight stretches are currently open. However, the Wales Coast Path, which does not give wider access to beaches etc. that the England Coast Path will provide, generates £16million of gross added value to the Welsh economy. We support the Government’s commitment to fund and construct the England Coast Path by 2020.

12. NE is carrying out on-site visitor surveys for the England Coast Path and national trails. This will enable a cost-benefit analysis of the paths, and will provide an understanding of the wider social and wellbeing benefits of providing access to the natural environment. We support the aims of this project, and believe that this will inform future investment strategies.

13. New visitors to the England Coast Path and national trails could be encouraged by raising awareness of public transport connections and parking, as well as opportunities to eat and drink near the national trails. This would generate further economic benefits to rural tourism through the provision of access to the natural environment.

14. NE has stated that the national trails face severe funding issues; the budget for the current financial year has recently been confirmed, however no assurance has been provided beyond that. Without funding maintained, it is likely that this will negatively impact tourism in rural areas. The Ramblers support calls to establish a new, independent trust for national trails to oversee their running and improve quality standards.

(ii) Open access

15. The ‘right to roam’ has been in effect in England since 2004 under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, with approximately 865,000 hectares of open access land in England.

16. The introduction of this has been a great success, and has provided economic benefits to the surrounding communities. For example, in the Lake District, where access land covers nearly 55% of the National Park, tourism generated £1.1billion and supported 16,013 jobs in 2014. However, not all areas that could have been opened up were.

17 Nick Cavill, Harry Rutter and Robin Gower (2014) Economic assessment of the health benefits of walking on the Wales Coast Path
20 Lake District National Partnership, STEAM Tourism Data, 2015
17. This is mostly due to the technical exercise undertaken to produce maps. Judgements were made to include or exclude areas based on fertilising and fencing rather than land use. The definitions used to map land types such as downland were based on vegetation. This meant that adjoining areas of countryside which looked the same to the average person were treated differently on the basis of a slightly different species composition, resulting in maps which can be confusing to the public.

18. The Ramblers call for better promotion of access rights to the general public. The recreational opportunities that access to these areas bring, alongside path and trail networks, makes the UK a unique place to visit and greater public understanding of these opportunities should be made. Greater publicity of open access land will likely increase the economic benefits to the local areas, as well as facilitating social and health benefits that recreational access to green spaces provides. The Ramblers stand by to participate in discussions with stakeholders involving the improvement, extension and publicity of open access land. In supporting improved opportunities to access to the countryside, the Government will ensure that the health and well-being, social and economic benefits can be extended.

(iii) Woodland

19. Over 40 million visits a year are made to the Public Forest Estate, making the Forestry Commission the largest provider of countryside recreation opportunities in England. Visits to Forestry Commission England woods and forests help to support more than 70 businesses and organisations; from camping and cabins sites, to cycle hire, cafes and restaurants. Public Forest Estate research identified that access (usually meaning having path(s) through woodlands) was considered desirable by study participants to enable recreational activities.

20. In 2010 the coalition government announced plans to sell the Public Forest Estate but withdrew these plans in the face of widespread opposition, leading to the setting up of an Independent Panel to advise on future policy.

21. The Independent Panel on Forestry recommended that Government “Measurably increase the quantity and quality of access to public and privately owned woodlands, by incentivising provision through a combination of paths or open access, particularly where this delivers greatest public benefit”, as well as set up a new management body to look after the public woods.
22. In response, the Government released a new policy statement agreeing with the recommendations and outlined that there should be greater access to woodland, particularly around towns and cities.25 This would likely increase the economic benefits to rural communities through increased tourism.

23. However, the Government proposals for the new management body do not include - as recommended by the Independent Panel - an access-related duty. Instead it sets a principle to “conserve and enhance the estate for the benefit of people, nature and the economy.”26

24. Primary legislation is required to implement the proposals for a new management body for England. The Draft Forestry Bill has still not been published.

25. The Government should set out how it intends to make real progress on its commitments to measurably increase access to woods, thereby ensuring that social and economic benefits reach rural communities.

26. **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?**

(i) **Local Enterprise Partnerships**

27. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have been established to drive economic growth and create jobs. They currently receive funding from both central government and from Europe that can be spent on supporting rural tourism and recreational infrastructure.

28. There is a great deal of competition for LEP funding from all sectors, and many LEPs are focussing their efforts to achieve growth in areas such as manufacturing. Yet it is vitally important that rural counties and the visitor economy also secure a share of LEP funding.

29. LEPs must be given strong encouragement to direct investment to rural areas to maximise growth opportunities for the micro-businesses and small and medium enterprises that depend on tourism and can spread the benefits of economic recovery. This effect can be particularly beneficial in remote rural and upland areas where opportunities for economic growth are limited.

30. The Government must recognise the economic contribution of outdoor recreation tourism, particularly in the rural economy, and ensure it is prioritised by existing funding mechanisms such as LEPs.

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(ii) Reform of agricultural subsidies

31. Following the outcome of the recent EU referendum, it is vital that the return of powers and funding to the UK are used as an opportunity to reconsider how public money can best support public goods, including connecting people to the countryside and the associated economic benefits to rural tourism.

32. Between 2005-2012, grants worth £23 million were paid through the Higher Level Scheme (HLS) to landowners who provide a temporary recreational resource for the public. This funded short-term access to: 4,000 ha open access land; 1,450 km footpaths; 1,250 km bridleways/cycle paths; 57 km for people with reduced mobility.27

33. Although some of the opportunities offered by HLS have been beneficial, the scheme has some fundamental flaws: the recreational opportunities it funds are only temporary; rules for publicising access opportunities are weak; and the access provided did not have to link up to the wider, permanent access rights of way network (and therefore was often of little use to the public).

34. The Ramblers calls for a new subsidy system that supports and encourages farmers to deliver public access, ensuring the provision of both local economic benefits and population public health benefits. A major independent study concluded that spending farming subsidy funds on improving access to attractive countryside, protecting wildlife and cutting greenhouse gases could produce annual benefits of over £18 billion, for a loss of less than £0.5 billion in UK agricultural production.28

35. The Ramblers calls for redevelopment of the subsidy system that provides an opportunity to fund permanent improvements to England’s recreational access infrastructure, boosting rural growth and development and improving public health. Financial support for landowners and managers to both complement existing public access on foot and fund the development of new access could ensure long lasting economic benefits from public subsidies through;

- Directing funding towards areas where there is clear demand, e.g. areas for improvement as identified through Rights of Way Improvement Plans or Local Community Plans
- Investing in existing rights of way and open access network, which may potentially provide more public benefit than providing new routes particularly as local government budget cuts impact on access
- Favouring permanent access provision over temporary, thereby providing maximum benefit for public subsidies as spending on infrastructure is not wasted when the temporary agreement ends

27 Natural England, Higher Level Stewardship permissive access evaluation (NECR113), 2013
36. **Infrastructure and skills: What measures are needed to ensure transport, housing and other infrastructure meets visitor needs? How can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?**

37. All parts of England have much to offer tourists, both foreign and domestic. This potential can be developed by improving access to the countryside by expanding the nation’s network of paths, trails and green spaces and better promoting these opportunities to potential visitors. Increased awareness and positive experiences will draw people to visit areas off the beaten track, benefitting local economies and the country as a whole.

38. However, the economic activity relating to tourism is also dependent on both the maintenance of high quality natural assets and on the provision of means by which visitors can access these. A good quality recreational access network - public rights of way, open access land, national trails and other publicly accessible green space - must be provided and maintained for rural businesses to benefit fully from tourism.

39. The extent and quality of public access is patchy and in some areas infrastructure is in poor condition. The last national survey on the condition of public rights of way (2000) revealed that on average walkers encountered a serious obstruction every 2km.²⁹

40. In 2015, the Ramblers conducted a citizen-science survey of the public rights of way across England and Wales. The survey identified that two fifths of the footpaths, bridleways and byways need improvement, with one tenth of the network in serious disrepair.³⁰ High quality public rights of way through well maintained infrastructure attract more visitors, thereby strengthening economic benefits gained through rural tourism.

41. Highway Authorities have a duty to maintain access to public rights of way. However, funding for recreation and walking infrastructure is dwindling; there has been an estimated 37% real-terms reduction in government funding to local authorities from 2010 to 2016.³¹

42. Highway Authorities must also be properly equipped to carry out their statutory duties on the existing access network, so that the means by which visitors often experience rural areas is maintained and enhanced. Underinvestment in the footpath network harms the rural economy (closing the countryside during 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak cost tourism industry an estimated £5billion³²), and creates even greater future problems as paths become impenetrable and unused.

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³¹ National Audit Office, *The impact of funding reductions on local authorities*, 2014
43. The total benefits from walking are greatly in excess of the costs of path restoration and maintenance. We believe that the numbers of visitors to the areas outside London could be increased by providing more and better opportunities for visitors to experience the landscapes of England on foot.

**Government Action**

44. Ramblers believe that in order to support rural growth and the benefits this provides, the Government should:

- Develop and implement a cross government plan for walking and outdoor recreation which recognises the need for the existing infrastructure to be properly maintained;
- Maintain funds to meet the government commitment to complete the England Coast Path and spreading room by 2020;
- Establish a new, independent trust for national trails to oversee their running and improve quality standards;
- Issue guidance to direct more LEP funding towards rural-based tourism industries, extending the benefits of the visitor economy;
- Develop a new scheme for agricultural subsidies that support public access;
- Facilitate and promote public access to outdoor spaces including the coast, woodland and open countryside;
- Invest in accessible and affordable public transport for residents and visitors to access countryside.

*September 2016*

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