Written evidence submitted by Susan Hedley (RUT0232)

1  A regular bus user, particularly on the X14 bus route which links Rothbury, a popular tourist destination in Northumberland, with the built up south east of Northumberland and Tyneside.
Brought up in Cheviot Hills, Northumberland National Park, now living in a rural village outside of the National Park, and working in our local market town.
Regular private observer of local government meetings, including Scrutiny committees, with no paid or voluntary office.

2  Encourage more people, both from the UK and abroad, to visit more of England’s rural places, for longer and at all times of the year;
2.1 From my observations, the various authorities, possibly excluding National Park, try much harder to attract visitors from far afield for one or two visits, rather than to attract and ensure easy access for the numerous people in adjacent urban areas who could become weekly, visitors to the countryside if those without cars were able to get here by public transport, and those with cars didn’t get stuck in traffic jams along the A1 and its A697 junction, especially Sundays and Bank Holidays, when bus services to Alnwick are only 2 hourly, and there is no bus service to Rothbury, with limited car parking and Sunday often its busiest day for tourists.

2.2 Concentrating on attracting people from further away means marketing resources benefit higher profile attractions like National Trust properties, large private properties like Alnwick and Bamburgh Castles, National Parks, coastal AONB, and possibly English Heritage. WERE MORE RESOURCES PUT INTO ATTRACTING AND ENABLING ACCESS FOR REPEAT VISITORS FROM ADJACENT BUILT UP AREAS, and establishing long-lasting relationships, THEY WOULD HAVE TIME TO EXPLORE SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ATTRACTIONS, possibly regularly, rather than just the big attractions on the itinerary of less regular visitors.

More use of family ticket reductions on buses at weekends might enable more families without cars to get out from built up areas to the countryside regularly for a change of scenery and air.

Everything possible needs to be done to increase the number of bus passengers so that they pay less for a financially viable service, rather than increasing the fares and reducing passenger numbers.

The demise of leaflets and transfer of information online also favours the big attractions. ONLINE MAKES BIG ATTRACTIONS TEND BIGGER, AND SMALLER ATTRACTIONS SMALLER. e.g. the Visit Northumberland website, for which I understand tourist businesses have to pay for a presence on it - is likely to favour the big attractions.

Attractions of all sizes outside of the National Park do not have its platform to notify visitors of their existence.
Access: What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?

Please see [Northumberland county council>all services>about the council>partners>] North East Combined Authority www.northeastca.gov.uk >committee meetings>overview and scrutiny committee>1 December 2015 agenda pack>Policy review: TRANSPORT RELATED BARRIERS – see MY SUBMISSION TO THIS CONSULTATION, WHICH IS ON P.140 – 163 INCLUSIVE: EVIDENCE FOR TRANSPORT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RURAL AREAS AND EXAMPLES OF PRACTICALITIES [apologies for page number references which got slightly scrambled in NECA’s valiant attempt to transfer them from my original document to their agenda pack – add approx. 18 to my page number references, or add 140 onto my page number references to use NECA page numbers]

Summary and extracts – NECA’s p. 140 – 146
Full text – NECA’s p. 147-163

N.B. MAP ON P.163, from early 2015, SHOWING CORRELATION OF SUBSIDISED BUS ROUTES, ACCESS LAND, AND BEACHES IN NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND. So far as I understand it, all routes north of Alnwick are subsidised, and Arriva’s X14 route from Morpeth and Tyneside feeding into the commercially run Rothbury Spiritbuses network is also subsidised. There is a similar picture in the west of Northumberland, but without a phenomenon like Rothbury Spiritbuses.

See also in my submission to NECA (North East Combined Authority):
All of section 2 – suitability of operational arrangements for buses, and examples of how they don’t serve visitors well
section 2.4 about SPIRITBUSES, A NEW LOCAL BUS COMPANY WHICH RUNS AN EXEMPLARY SERVICE FOR VISITORS
and section 2.6.6 THERE SHOULD BE MORE VISITOR INFORMATION PRESENTED FROM THE BUS USER’S POINT OF VIEW. i.e, not just a bus network map with no clue as to what attractions might be on offer on the routes, and not just a list of destinations which, when checked, include a high proportion of attractions which aren’t accessible by bus, but A MAP SHOWING THESE PIECES OF INFORMATION COMBINED.
Section 3.6. – getting timetable information
Section 4.1 – information and facilities on bus routes
Section 5.7 – Morpeth and Alnwick bus stations – Alnwick has one of the biggest international tourist attractions in the region, but a disgusting bus station for arriving visitors, due to lax owners and operators and disputes over management responsibilities. Morpeth has one of the best bus stations in the region, but doesn’t figure greatly on the international tourist map
Appendix 1 Flyer of scenic bus routes which I did myself in desperation, because no organisations in the region seemed to be making any attempt to promote them
Appendix 2 MAP OF BUS ROUTES AND ACCESS LAND IN NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND

I SUGGEST THAT YOU DO A CASE STUDY OF ROTHBURY SPIRITBUSES, WHICH LAUNCHED ON 1/9/16, AND WHAT IT HAS DONE FOR ROTHBURY, WHICH IS AN IMPORTANT TOURIST DESTINATION IN NORTHUMBERLAND, AND WHAT THE EFFECTS WILL BE ON THE ROTHBURY
ECONOMY AND THE SPIRITBUSES NETWORK, WHICH ALLOWS VISITORS AND REGULAR WALKERS TO GET TO SOME OF NORTHUMBERLAND’S MORE REMOTE UPLAND DESTINATIONS, WHEN THE SUBSIDISED X14 SERVICE WHICH BRINGS PEOPLE FROM MORPETH AND TYNESIDE TO ROTHBURY IS REDUCED THIS MONTH, SEPTEMBER 2016. [See 1/9/16 post under the news tab on www.spiritbuses.co.uk]

MORE CRUCIAL BECAUSE ROTHBURY IS JUST RECOVERING ITS FIRST PROPER TOURIST SEASON AFTER 3 SUMMER SEASONS WITHOUT THE MAIN ROAD INTO IT, CLOSED BY THE DECEMBER 2012 LANDSLIDE.

YOU COULD ALSO INCLUDE A COMPARISON OF ALNWICK AND MORPETH BUS STATIONS, which, with a combination of subsidised Arriva routes and Spiritbuses commercial routes, allow a spectacularly scenic circular journey which gives access to some of the region’s greatest attractions: Alnwick Castle and Garden, National Trust Cragside, the Cheviot Hills, and the Simonside Hills – come and see for yourselves if you can, and include the Northumberland Coast and Hadrian’s Wall too if you have time – this county gets repeat visitors for good reason.

STEVE HURST/SPIRITBUSES, has been a finalist/winner for various awards such as Small Bus Operator and North East Rural Hero, and featured in numerous bus industry articles, and various features such as England’s top scenic bus routes, and USES EVERY POSSIBLE MEANS TO SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT RURAL BUS SERVICES AND ENCOURAGE MORE PEOPLE TO USE THEM AND KEEP THEM VIABLE, WORKING HARD TO KEEP HIS SPIRITBUSES FACEBOOK AND TWITTER FEEDS LIVELY AND UP TO.

His RECORDED ANNOUNCEMENTS LINKED TO GPS TRACKING, in collaboration with the National Park Authority, have TOURIST INFORMATION ABOUT WILDLIFE AND HISTORY WHEN THE GPS IDENTIFIES THE RELEVANT PLACES, appear to be popular, and drawing in more visitors who have heard about it from their friends, and repeat visitors because they enjoy it and can get more out of their countryside trip.

STEVE HAS USED THE LATEST IN TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO RUN A PROPER COUNTRY BUS SERVICE IN THE MODERN WORLD. I think that it is the best that I have ever used in 45 years of using bus services. I really wish they could all be like this THE SPIRITBUSES FACEBOOK PAGE SHOWS jars of marmalade, goats, alpacas, welsh black mountain sheep, dogs, wildlife, happy groups of walkers, family parties, heart-warming stories, children’s colouring, agricultural shows, musical and charity events, snowploughs, unique landscapes, spectacular sunsets, road conditions, information about local attractions, and a great deal more: A TRUE AND JOYOUS PICTURE OF OUR LOCALITY WHICH IS NOW AVAILABLE TO FOLLOWERS WORLDWIDE.

HE IS BRINGING IN NEW VISITORS WHO PREVIOUSLY HAD NO KNOWLEDGE OR UNDERSTANDING OF THESE COMMUNITIES, even though they are in the same region. e.g. on the bus one day with Alwinton looking its best, I heard one of a group of three ladies who had obviously come for a trip out of town for the day remark to the others “You would never imagine that such places existed”.
He has also enabled people from the town to get out to enjoy the countryside even when they don’t have cars, or to improve the countryside for everyone by leaving their cars at home. In effect, people without cars can now do things which they never had a hope of doing before, though people with cars could do them without a thought.

Infrastructure and skills: What measures are needed to ensure transport, housing and other infrastructure meets visitor needs?

With more houses being built all over the country, but apparently no more car parking being provided in Northumberland, we need more public transport at leisure times to avoid traffic congestion on routes to popular tourist destinations. We also need them to be advertised better, e.g.

- Unlike one of Northumberland’s biggest tourist destinations at Bamburgh, where the southbound bus stop nearest to the castle had absolutely no timetable information in it at all at the end of June. There is still many people who would arrive at that bus stop without the means or inclination to have a smart phone for finding out bus times.
- The southbound X14 bus stop at Weldon Bridge, used by walkers for come off/accessing St. Oswald’s Way and walking short stretches to Rothbury or Felton. Rather than signposting it is a bus stop for St. Oswald’s Way, it is hidden amongst overgrown vegetation and looks derelict.
- The X15 bus stop at Gallery 45, a popular art venue for some years, is still named the Stag’s Head in the timetable, though it could be used to advertise the attraction.
- Rural bus stops with stops on both sides of the road, but a shelter and noticeboard on one side only, are inconsistent in the information provided. Some noticeboards display for both sides of the road and directions, and some for only one, such as Cheviot Lodge, Longframlington today, and the Northumberland Arms, Felton, popular for tourists to stay at, who often look at the bus timetable, but sometimes only the Newcastle bound times are displayed, and not times for Alnwick and coast.

Planning the bus network

Rural buses need to be part of the whole bus network, so that they can bring in day-trippers on easily accessible bus journeys to boost the rural economy, with reliable buses (probably best achieved from rural depots which would then be going in the most efficient direction – i.e. taking rural people to work in town and bringing visitors back, and vice versa at the end of the day. (see my section 2 in NECA consultation submission cited above).

Keeping rural buses viable as part of the whole network cannot be achieved by treating subsidised rural bus services as if they are only for getting rural residents to work, education or services. Their part in the network to support the rural economy by bringing in regular visitors needs to be taken into account equally.

The X14 route to Rothbury is a perfect example. Later this September, it is being reorganised to operate with reduced subsidy money, so is going to have reduced frequency between commuting times, even though, as I have written to Northumberland County Council, there are at least five significant reasons why passengers are now likely to increase e.g. new houses, and large shops on the route without
extra car parking, the Spiritbuses guided tour now drawing more bus passengers into Rothbury.

I have waited until today’s deadline for your inquiry, but the new X14 bus timetable hasn’t yet been published on Northumberland County Council or Arriva websites. Having had sight the proposed timetable, and it looked to me as though it wouldn’t allow people with concessionary passes to get from Morpeth to Rothbury until almost lunchtime. I pointed out to the County Council that if the subsidised service left Morpeth for Rothbury at 9am instead of 8.55, pensioners from Morpeth would then be able to use their concessionary passes, and so add to the sparse number of passengers who use this service at present, get to Rothbury for morning coffee as well as lunch, and a really good day of walking in the hills, rather than just the afternoon. Kirsten Francis and Neil Easton of Northumberland County Council have done their very best to make the subsidy money stretch as far as it will go for passengers within the parameters they have got, but I don’t think that these include any consideration of implications for tourist businesses in rural areas or the viability of the rural bus network as a whole. I am therefore not optimistic that they will be able to change the time of the 8.55 service to Rothbury, though they took note of my comments.

At meetings in 2015, I saw Northumberland County Cllrs., particularly the Cabinet, congratulating themselves because they had moved responsibility for bus policy to the portfolio which includes Economic Development Strategy, leaving only Transport Strategy, Connectivity, and the details of day to day running of public transport with the Streetcare and Environment portfolio holder, because they thought that it made more sense that buses should be considered as part of economic policy along with tourism. However, I have seen no evidence that this has made any difference to how decisions have been funded or made for the X14 to Rothbury.

There are also problems with reliability on the town-based routes serving country areas. The X14’s depot is in Ashington, urban south east Northumberland, with no Arriva information offices or supervisors anywhere nearer. As a regular bus user and taxpayer, paying for a weekly ticket, with some of my taxes subsidising this route, in all my 45 years of using buses on this route and across the country, I have never experienced a less reliable service. It looks as though since it is a subsidised service with no competition, the operators have little incentive to put effort into getting more passengers to make it more viable, or even making it good enough to keep new passengers. Two weeks ago a bus which has been regularly breaking down for weeks came to a stop. A visitor staying in Rothbury was on it, saying that even she knew that it had broken down two days earlier, and passengers had had to wait almost an hour for a replacement. This has an impact on the rural services which are trying to provide a connecting network for their local passengers.

Today, I waited for an Arriva X14 bus to Rothbury to get to Alnwick in 50 minutes on the Spiritbus from Rothbury instead of 1 hr 40 minutes via Morpeth. Officially Spiritbuses leave Rothbury a minute or two after Arriva arrives, but Spiritbuses try to wait for Arriva. Arriva was running 20 minutes late this morning, so Spiritbuses would have waited in vain, but couldn’t have waited that long time, so it was too late for me to get to Alnwick, the businesses there lost my custom, and Spiritbuses missed carrying me and selling a new ten
journey ticket which has no date limit on it, because I don’t know when I will get the chance to travel with them again.

In addition to the current uncertainty with subsidised timetables, bus services in this area are now under much greater uncertainty. Today, the Leadership Board of the North East Combined Authority will be voting on whether to continue the devolution process or miss the government’s deadline. If they continue, reports indicate some uncertainty about whether they will have to have an elected mayor. One of the elected mayor’s main responsibilities would be public transport. This is the first Combined Authority containing rural authorities (Northumberland – one of the most sparsely populated in England, and County Durham) amongst its seven participants. The leaders of all seven are from urban areas, and four authorities, in Sunderland and Tyneside, are completely urban, with Gateshead, which is not fully committed, a mixture. The elected mayor would be responsible for 800,000 households from Berwick in rural Northumberland through urban Tyneside to Sunderland, and across rural Durham to Nenthead. The chances are that they will be an urban person operating from an urban base within the authority. We will therefore have to start educating the people responsible for public transport within the authority all over again about rural public transport. Seeing no mention of subsidised transport in the North East Combined Authority’s devolution proposals, only sustainable transport, I assume it means financially viable. From what I have observed at meetings so far, most effort and money is likely to go into extending the Metro system throughout the urban area. Taking an active part in consultations on Northumberland’s arrangements for subsidised bus routes, I suspect that the area’s three large bus companies are positioning themselves in case we do get a mayor, who, according to the new Buses Bill would have automatic franchising powers for bus services, so they would be in the strongest position for negotiating. In north Northumberland, where Arriva appears to have an effective monopoly on the most profitable routes, [see www.gov.uk/government/organisations/competition-and-markets-authority >Arriva Northumbria 2010, especially paragraphs 82 and 88, it looks to me as a layperson as though Arriva might be ensuring that it dominates the area and possibly weakens competition so much that an elected mayor would only have Arriva to negotiate with.

I have suggested that you make a case study of the Arriva X14 subsidised route and the commercially operated Rothbury Spiritbuses network, popular with tourists in Northumberland, but the new X14 timetable not yet being published, still awaiting news about how it will affect the Spiritbuses timetable, also awaiting today’s North East Combined Authority decision which will have a radical effect on funding and organisation of rural public transport in the region, I will try to send you updates on any developments.

September 2016