1. Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should the Government do to support this work?

The fundamental problem is that cuts in public funding support for marketing campaigns at both the national and local level means that both international and national marketing favours the larger urban destinations and the large leisure and tourism corporate players. Government austerity policy has focused on leveraging more funds from the tourism industry to replace declining public investment and unsurprisingly the simplest and easiest way to achieve this is to target the major airlines, hotel groups, visitor attraction operators and city destinations. This does little to promote off-the beaten track England with the focus being to drive more business towards the honeypot destinations. However, it does enable Ministers to claim that they’ve replaced public funds with private investment. We recognise that it’s almost impossible for national agencies to deliver campaigns involving rural tourism SMEs and that these sorts of campaigns need to be co-ordinated at either the regional or local level.

However, the promotion of rural destinations has suffered considerably since the abolition of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Regional Tourist Boards (RTBs) in 2010. Government strategy focused on Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) replacing RTBs as partnerships between tourism businesses and local authorities. The reality has been a patchwork of fragile local authority and public/private partnership organisations that struggle to make an impact. Many of these organisations are chasing the same businesses for membership scheme participation and advertising revenues. Whilst DMOs are potentially simpler to establish and run in branded city destinations, this is not the case in rural destinations where there may be a number of destination brands. Most other countries have maintained a sub-national infrastructure rather than foster a chaotic free-for-all.

Visit Britain’s main focus is on developing the overseas markets for the UK, working with the national tourism bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Visit Britain’s marketing activity has been generally focussed on the capital and those honeypot sites (many of which are urban locations) that are already attracting significant numbers of overseas visitors. Whilst it makes sense to market those destinations that already have a high awareness in the overseas visitors minds, this approach is therefore of limited benefit to many rural lesser known destinations that do not feature in their promotions. There is usually a cost for individual destinations to participate in specific overseas promotions led by Visit Britain that are simply unaffordable for many rural destinations.

The recent re-absorption of Visit England back into Visit Britain is in our opinion a backward step that has not only left England as the only part of the UK without an independent national tourist board it has also taken away resource and emphasis on domestic promotion. Whilst the cost of participation was still unaffordable for many rural destinations, it also focussed on the better known destinations nevertheless it did raise
awareness of the advantages of taking a holiday or short break at home and responded to the ‘staycation’ trend. Visit England also provided valuable support advice and research to assist all destinations in their own domestic marketing activities.

The current ‘Discover England Fund’ is aimed at developing the overseas markets and the timing requirements have been beyond the reach of many ‘fledgling’ DMOs that have neither the resources nor skills to pull a bid together. This also favours large tourism businesses when trying to find matched funding as opposed to the many micro-businesses that make up the rural visitor economy.

The abolition of Visit England as an independent body focused on promoting domestic tourism and its subsequent merger into Visit Britain has reduced the level of nationally supported tourism investment. Government has focused its support on promoting inbound tourism, believing that domestic tourism just displaces spend from one part of the national economy to another. We do not support this notion as rural destinations are disproportionately dependent on domestic visits in comparison with major cities (60% of international visitors never leave London) and nationally we need to persuade more people to holiday at home.

We would recommend that the Government learns a lesson from other countries in that the private sector cannot replace public funding of tourism destination promotion, particularly in rural destinations where SMEs with limited marketing budgets dominate. Local authorities have been subject to huge funding cuts and therefore pressure on supporting discretionary activities such as tourism promotion will therefore only increase.

Another issue is that national tourism promotion tends to rely on developing consistent rural “messages” which can fit generically or thematically with wider destination marketing. Whilst this makes for cost-effective umbrella campaigns at a wider destination level it does tend to underplay local distinctiveness. This “top down” approach needs reviewing with the opportunity for local destinations to feature in national and sub-national campaigns on their own terms. Government should explore new opportunities to give local rural communities the opportunity to market their destinations. DMOs and the third sector could play a key delivery role, working closely with their Local Authority partners and LEPs.

National Trails, including the South Downs Way and the new sections of the England Coast Path in Hampshire, are key assets for rural tourism and have great potential to contribute to the rural economy, with appropriate marketing this potential could be maximised, however Natural England grants for National Trails do not fund marketing expenditure.

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

The responsibility for the management and maintenance of rights of way is principally with Highway Authorities. Managing these assets under current budget constraints is a challenge which means that signage, interpretation and route clearance is compromised. The provision of better signposted routes with added destination and distance information would help visitors make more informed decisions about which routes are worth taking.
Whilst local authorities and National Parks have been creative in developing new operational relationships any new funding is principally secured via grants and developer contributions (s106/CiL). However, this type of funding is typically directed to new infrastructure and capital investments (e.g. cycle routes, paths between towns or transport hubs and key facilities) and cannot be used to maintain the network (or the enhancements once created), which is instead reliant on local authority funding and working practice.

It is the duty to maintain the surface of the highway that incurs the largest annual maintenance cost for local authorities, specifically the annual cutting of natural vegetation. This tends to be the single largest cause for complaints from users of the rights of way network. However as budgets become under more pressure the ability of local authorities to provide a network that will embrace and reap the benefits of tourism is increasingly under threat.

It is recommended that the government reviews how grants and planning/developer contributions could be adapted to not only fund developments to right of way networks, but also ongoing maintenance costs, to ensure that standards can be maintained. It is also recommended that greater partnership working is encouraged to ensure that as visitor numbers increase, high quality routes and experiences can continue to be provided.

Improved public transport and supportive infrastructure such as small car parks helps with accessibility. Better information, both on and off-line would help visitors to explore the countryside. However, rural mobile connectivity limits opportunities for most rural destinations.

3. 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?

Project funding support such as EAFRD, Regional Growth Fund, redundant building grants and grants for physical improvements and expansion have successfully supported tourism businesses when bank support has been less available or reliable. This has encouraged growth and the raising of standards in rural areas. However, these initiatives have not helped fund promotion and marketing activity and therefore risked the success of the initial capital investment. There has tended to be a focus on using public funds to support innovation and ‘fads’ rather than the tried and tested and capture news headlines, which threatens long term sustainability.

In this context, rural tourism businesses face multiple challenges in new, or emerging, visitor destinations with a low consumer profile. In the first place, they need to work together to boost the area’s appeal, and to attract and retain good quality staff. The fragility of many DMOs in rural areas is also a factor in providing a supportive framework of marketing and business support activity. These were helpful services provided by Regional Tourist Boards and Business Link and have not been effectively replaced by new LEP business support services.
There could be an opportunity to foster an improved network of “mini-DMOs” at local community level, with tourist businesses working cooperatively as destination partnerships, perhaps operating as CICs.

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) should not be seen as the panacea for replacing public sector funding. BIDs can often be competing with existing tourism organisations in promoting destinations due to a misalignment of BID priorities. BIDs cannot overlap, so there will be many occasions where an existing BID trumps the opportunity for a wider potential tourism focused BID. BIDs are expensive and high risk to develop and there can be significant resistance from businesses. Similarly bed tax and other methods that either cost the operator or the visitor more are likely to be unwelcome, especially in a country which already charges such high levels of VAT and parking charges.

Online Travel Agents (OTAs) can also have a negative impact by benefiting from the destination promotion activity but contributing nothing towards the costs. Their high commission rates (20-30%) adversely affect the profit margins of accommodation providers. Taxation on these organisations is one option that could see funds coming back into the destinations for promotion and development. Offering training and support to businesses to help them manage their OTA relationships is another option.

There needs to be further clarification around the implications of BREXIT and impact on EU Structural Funds as rural areas benefit disproportionately from these sources. There is also a need to provide easier to access grant opportunities for diversification. The bureaucracy of LEADER and other EU Structural Funds needs to be addressed in any replacement schemes. The lack of knowledge and skills in central government departments is a real issue, particularly due to the abolition of RDAs and centralisation of responsibility and support.

4. Planning and regulation: 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?

Appropriate and sensitive development in special areas should be encouraged as they create jobs and add to the local economy in areas that would otherwise offer no opportunities for the indigenous population. The countryside should not be preserved in aspic, but neither should development be at the expense of it. Strong robust conservation policies and clear guidance in the local plan can and should encourage positive development and deter unwelcome proposals. Particular issues include use of appropriate local materials and local design style to ensure the character of an area is protected. Policies should not be used however as a means of stopping all development as has often been the case in certain rural areas.

There needs to be an increasing supply of good quality visitor accommodation in many rural destinations. Planning remains a barrier to rural visitor accommodation development, although is improving, particularly where local planning authorities have commissioned research to fully understand the opportunities for visitor accommodation development in their area. There is however often a strong resistance from development management
officers and planning committees to new-build development and accommodation developments of any scale in the countryside, particularly in protected areas.

There is a need for a more positive and better informed approach to the formulation of planning policies for visitor accommodation development in England’s rural areas, and a more supportive development management approach, with development management teams working more constructively with rural accommodation businesses and land owners to achieve viable visitor accommodation projects that meet market needs and protect the environment.

Local Planning Authorities are regularly under-resourced and struggle to deal efficiently and consistently with planning applications. It was unhelpful that the Good Practice Guide on Planning for Tourism was deleted by DCLG in its 2013 Review of Technical Planning Practice Guidance as this creates an advice vacuum.

5. 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?

One of the principal issues for many years has been the lack of broadband provision in rural areas. Although there have been numerous Government backed initiatives to address this issue, there has been limited traction.

Extremely poor mobile infrastructure is too readily ignored particularly when it is becoming more important for the visitor. It’s quite telling that when holidaying in a remote Greek Island that one can receive high quality mobile reception, but this is not achievable in many urban fringe destinations across England. This means that for many visitors they will not be able to access information on visitor attraction opening times; train and bus timetables and live feeds; mapping solutions; social media. We should not expect our visitors to have to find a coffee shop, fast food outlet, pub etc to beg for wi-fi access.

The failure of the Government Mobile Infrastructure Project and the new reliance of a binding agreement on the mobile operators to invest £5bn by 2017 put significant faith in the industry to plug significant gaps. But this commitment will only increase full coverage from 69% to 85% of geographic areas.

Public transport in rural areas is a key concern; if bus services are available they are often infrequent, uncoordinated and unsuitable to support visitors to an area. Cuts to local authority bus subsidy budgets will only continue. Greater commitment is needed to support public transport in rural areas, including sustainable tourism strategies to make rural areas more accessible without the use of a car. There are some good examples of seasonal bus services to tourist destinations in rural areas however these networks tend to only be supported during the summer period, therefore limiting the potential for tourism at other times of the year.

Brexit has resulted in considerable debate around how EU workers will be affected. Unless some form of access to working in the UK is retained, there will need to be a huge focus on
replacing these lost workers with UK nationals. This would require a huge investment in skills and training development and an attitude change.

Affordable housing should be seen as a vital part of ensuring a healthy and vibrant community not as being a detriment to village life. Without affordable housing the local services and businesses will struggle to get staff and maintain the range of services that these villages wish to see. Sustainable communities rely on having a diverse range of people from across all the socio-demographic divides.

6. Local environment and character: How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

There are substantial opportunities to grow rural tourism across England. Honey pot sites continue to be over promoted by the national tourist boards and even at a local level. Lesser known areas still have spare capacity for both day and staying visitors. Visitors need to be aware of these alternatives and be persuaded to visit. The key is in raising awareness of these alternative options and influencing visitors to consider them.

A principal concern is the impact of cuts to local authority budgets on dealing with waste. This could lead to more fly tipping because access to refuse sites are restricted, charge for many items or sites are closed, plus less clearing up of car thrown litter because. Many incidences of fly-tipping are where footpaths and bridleways link with the road network or in countryside site car-parks.

It is pleasing to see that eventually there are more signs threatening drivers with prosecution on the trunk road network if they are caught littering on CCTV. We would advocate increased pressure on the Road Haulage Association to campaign to stop lorry drivers littering on all roads.

We would also strongly advocate that a deposit refund scheme for glass and plastic containers be explored to combat throw-away one-way packaging which is wasteful of natural resources and would severely limit littering. A significant number of our European neighbours and US States have adopted this scheme.

7. Defra role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do to ensure government departments (including Departments for Communities and Local Government, Business, Innovation and Skills, Culture Media and Sport and HM Treasury) support rural tourism?

DEFRA could help advocate the benefits that tourism can bring to rural communities. England has many rural areas that are yet to fulfil their tourism growth potential if they had the right support.

Government must recognise that rural tourism and in particular micro businesses need public sector funding support more than urban destinations. There is also a need to ensure that public funding programmes are constructed to support on-going revenue costs rather
than just initial capital outlay. This will ensure that more enterprises are supported into maturity.

As rural communities are more dependent on ESIF, there is also a particular need for DEFRA to ensure that clarity on the impact of BREXIT is provided quickly.

DEFRA could also help raise the importance of the rural tourism with Local Enterprise Partnerships, as this is rarely a priority, with it tending to be overlooked in preference for industrial sectors that have a higher profile, even though these may say more about aspiration than what is realistically achievable.

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