Written evidence submitted by the National Trail Working Group (RUT0238)

At its meeting on 12 July 2016, representatives of all England National Trails agreed to establish a Working Group. The 6 appointed members of the Working Group are working to establish the parameters for a new National Trails Association in consultation with Natural England and DEFRA. This response to the inquiry has been collated by the Working Group on behalf of the 13 National Trails in England.

Key Point Summary:

Promotion and Protection of walking in high quality landscapes along England’s finest walking routes is of vital importance in order to maximise National Trail tourism benefits, which are predominantly felt in some of our most rural and coastal areas. Places that must need stable continuous investment in order to sustain and bolster fragile economies.

National Trails propose the following solutions:

1. Reinstate the New Deal - secure, planned funding, following a 3 year cycle, enables Trail Partnerships to match core funding by over 50% - twice their contractual commitment. This core funding should be viewed as essential catalyst funding to lever in far more, both direct income and economic and welfare value.

2. Marketing of England’s National Trails should be fit for purpose by the launch of the England Coast Path in 2020 - including the National Trail family website which requires an immediate review and a new model of investment and delivery for the future.

3. National Trails require a co-ordinated and effective National Champion on a par with those representing protected landscapes. DEFRA and Natural England should consult with National Trails and help to establish a National Trail Association to enable National Trails to become more self-reliant, with the capacity and capability to market themselves and generate income collectively.

Note - This report relates to all England’s National Trails. Because its main author comes from the South West, the key examples of evidence cited here are largely from the South West. The England National Trails Working Group is currently engaged in collating available evidence about all National Trails: this evidence is therefore not available in time to inform this report.

Marketing

Research has shown that the most sought after information on the Visit England web site is about the countryside of the South West, with finding out about history and heritage close behind. The most popular way of exploring the countryside is on foot, with 83% of visitors to Cornwall undertaking a short walk during their visit. Rural tourism in Norfolk is worth some £1.8bn per annum. Most people visiting the Norfolk countryside come to experience walking as part of their visit and the National Trail is the key walking offer within the County.
Therefore, promotion of walking in high quality landscapes along England’s finest walking routes is of vital importance in order to maximise National Trail tourism benefits, which are predominantly felt in some of our most rural areas.

The National Trail brand is jointly owned by Natural England and Natural Resources Wales. Following funding cuts and the decision to limit the use of DEFRA funding for the Marketing and Promotion of National Trails resulted in Natural England’s agreement with Walk Unlimited. However, the agreement with Walk Unlimited creates a number of challenges for Trails which are difficult to address as there is no term to this agreement, review period, associated measurable outputs such as website reach, and no exit strategy. The Walk Unlimited website (www.nationaltrail.co.uk) currently generates limited revenue for the Trails and is currently financially unviable therefore Walk Unlimited have approached the Trails for funding to maintain it, or risk losing the website altogether.

At a local level, as a result to changes in funding for Destination Marketing Organisations (was Destination Management Organisations) means these bodies must now generate their own income through an ‘industry pays approach’. This creates issues for the consumer who are increasingly seeking experiences, often outdoor and active and often quirky, unique accommodation offers rather than those who can necessarily afford to pay. This solution is often not particularly attractive to businesses who can afford to make full use of their own online booking and marketing. This leads to a business led marketing approach, with hotels and attractions competing, even in a small geographical area, rather than a product or consumer led approach. It creates a fragmented approach to tourism in many locations. There is a lack of regional and local strategic leadership. National Trails in some locations have helped to fill this breach, working closely with National Parks and AONBs.

National destination marketing has focussed almost entirely on generic national campaigns and supporting DMOs in the regions and therefore replicates many of the local issues at a national level. National Trails are not collectively promoted on Visit England website and searching for walking on the website does not link to National Trails. They are important windows into rural regions, some of which would struggle to obtain a national profile independently.

The Government’s stated aim to encourage visitors to explore the UK outside London and other cities is a good ambition that could bring far greater investment to rural areas. Visit England / Visit Britain have restructured and organised themselves to now focus on product marketing. There is an opportunity for National Trails to be better represented and promoted by Visit England.

The new £40 million Discover England Fund focusses on product marketing and has funded a pilot project with the South West Coast Path to lead on collective south west destination marketing in collaboration with the local DMOs but one that is product/experience led. This project has the opportunity to be amplified later to include the other National Trails and England Coast Path and could be seen as an opportunity for match funding to resolve some of the issues that relate to the family of National Trails website.
Both the South West Coast Path and Norfolk Peddar’s Way and Coast Path have been successful in generating funding from RDPE and Coastal Communities Fund which has included investment in both the infrastructure and marketing. Despite considerable storm damage in both locations this resulted in users growing by 11% in the South West and by (between 2010 and 2014) 36% (between 2013 and 2016) for the Norfolk Coast Path. In the South West this has been calculated as an increased spend of £86.7 million from £382 million to £468 million – an increase of 22.7%, compared to 12.2% for tourism as a whole within the region.

Access

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 set out the provisions for long distance routes. In England and Wales these long distance routes are National Trails, dedicated to distance walking, cycling and horse riding routes through the best landscapes. There are 15 National Trails all identified by the Acorn symbol. Walkers can enjoy 2,500 miles of them all, cyclists and horse riders can enjoy the Pennine Bridleway and the South Downs Way, as well as sections of the other Trails. Natural England report that between 63 and 140 million visits to the natural environment are taken per year to places passed through by a National Trail.

Part 9 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 covers the implementation of a coastal route around England. The Act places a coastal access duty on both DEFRA and Natural England to secure a walking route around the English coast (the England Coast Path) and an associated margin of coastal land (giving a right of access to typical coastal land types such as foreshore, beach, dune and cliff).

Latest Natural England research (2016 Coastal Analysis of Monitoring of Engagement with the Natural Environment) due to be published this summer shows 313 million visits were made to the English coast between March 2014 and February 2015. Findings also show that between March 2009 and February 2015, there was a 138 per cent increase in visits to paths, cycleways and bridleways at coastal locations. On average, during the same period (2009 to 2015) £18 was spent on coastal visits, compared to £6 on a visit to the wider countryside.

Whilst the creation of this new National Trail is ring fenced, core funding for all National Trails has declined by 30% since 2010 which is resulting in a decline in National Trail standards overall.

England’s PROW network is probably one of the best formally legally underpinned networks in the world. However, the ability of Highway Authorities to maintain the network to acceptable standards has been seriously compromised as a result of local authority budgetary cuts over the past 6 years. Without a surrounding PROW network to provide access on and off the National Trails they would lose a significant amount of their appeal and functionality. The solution lies in ring fencing maintenance funding at local level.
The ORVal Tool is a web application (accessed at http://leep.exeter.ac.uk/orval) developed by the Land, Environment, Economics and Policy (LEEP) Institute at the University of Exeter with support from DEFRA. ORVal’s primary purpose is to help quantify the benefits that are derived from accessible outdoor recreation areas in England. ORVal estimates that 17,535,182 visits are made to South West Coast Path each year (as day trips by resident English adults) generating welfare value that amounts to £79,810,785. The maintenance costs for the South West Coast Path of around £725,000 per year enable visits that generate welfare values some 110 times greater than the cost in magnitude.

With ORVal it is possible to use the same procedure to estimate the welfare value over all regions to give the total welfare value for all 13 National Trails in England. ORVal estimates that the total welfare of all National Trails in England is some £348 million per year.

Only a minority of National Trail users are long-distance walkers proceeding along the Trail. This means that the majority either have to turn back and retrace their steps or try to find public transport links parallel to the Trail. As National Trails are overwhelmingly in rural areas these public transport links are often patchy at best, so discouraging the use of the Trails. Public transport provision is a matter for the private transport industry and the local authorities and awareness of the value of providing such links to help maintain a viable National Trail needs improving. In some cases local authorities often seem not to be sufficiently internally co-ordinated in this respect so that departments responsible for access and leisure and those responsible for public transport do not interact appropriately.

**Funding and fiscal policies**

The New Deal: Management of National Trails in England from April 2013 set out how National Trails are managed by local trail partnerships, with guidance, investment and support from Natural England. There are 4 quality standards for National Trails which cover a range of factors, from path condition to the social and economic benefits of the trail. These standards are set by Natural England, who work with local Trail partnerships to collect information about progress.

The New Deal set out Natural England’s pledge to provide 75% funding in return for local contributions of 25% on a three yearly cycle. Whilst the last three year funding commitment had declined from previous years, it was a firm commitment, thus enabling Trail Partnerships to plan ahead. As a result total National Trail spend for 2015/16 reached £4.05 million with only £1.79 million of this from Natural England.

At this time funding for National Trails is under threat. Natural England proposed a 50% in year cut during 2016/17 which would have resulted in the almost immediate closure of sections of National Trail. This threat continues: National Trails have been informed that New Deal no longer exists, but there is no other agreement in place. This creates immediate practical issues for staffing, recruitment or undertaking any works on the National Trails. The lack of ability to plan ahead means that Trail partnerships are unable to innovate and invest in developing other sources of income or volunteering. The previous 3 year cycle enabled the Trails to use as match funding / leverage for capital investment from local authorities and other funders.
During 2015/2016 secure, planned funding, enabled Trail Partnerships to match core maintenance funding by over 50% - twice their contractual commitment.

Funding uncertainty creates business insecurity. Businesses thrive working with a high quality National Trail, thus where the Path suffers so do businesses leading to lack of confidence in investing to grow, developing people’s skills or establishing new enterprises.

LEADER funding, although complex to access, was an important source of funding for rural enterprise, Brexit provides an opportunity to create an easier to access programme of funding for rural enterprises to encourage growth in areas that benefit from a world class National Trail.

Planning and regulation

The National Trails are intended to offer access to the country’s finest landscapes, and research indicates that ‘Attractive views and scenery’ is the most important factor when people decide where to go for a walk. It is therefore vitally important that the landscapes through which the Trails pass are maintained to a high quality, in order to provide a first-class experience to the users of the Trails.

The current review of how agri-environment funding will be delivered post-Brexit, provides an opportunity for future programmes to be more closely targeted to protect and enhance the landscape and biodiversity of the countryside the Trails pass through.

While National Trails often pass through protected landscapes such as National Parks and AONBs, where the expectation is that policy will favour the environment, this is not universally the case, and planning authorities should be aware of the importance of the protection and maintenance of the landscape environment throughout the length of the National Trails, not only within the protected landscapes. Users of National Trails should expect a high quality environment, and this will help maintain a prosperous rural economy based on the Trails. Planning authorities should be encouraged to consider the impact of development on National Trails and on users’ experience while on them.

National Trails are not currently a statutory consultee in local planning applications. This has created situations where approved developments have impacted on sections of National Trail.

Infrastructure and skills

Recreational services such as toilets, car parks and communal outdoor spaces are vital assets for a highly regarded tourism experience, however funding cuts at local authority level have resulted in the closure of many of these services. This coupled with the move of DMO’s to entirely having a marketing focus rather than management has left a gap in connected thinking relating to the things in a rural community that help to sustain tourism.

A long standing difficulty for tourism is the seasonal and low income nature of much of the industry. By lengthening the period of the year over which National Trails attract users,
there is a likelihood that seasonality can be reduced. This in turn depends on adequate funding for maintenance of the Trails so that they can be used over the whole, or much of, the year rather than for 6 months only. Rural tourism as a career prospect needs boosting, and can include imparting to rural tourism workers on National Trails a knowledge of the Trail, the local history, condition, points of interest seen on the Trail etc so that interaction with users heightens the tourism offer. And the better the tourism job prospect, the more opportunity there will be for rural young people to continue to live in their home area.

Practical skills are also an issue. Maintenance of paths can be a specialist, as well as an important, job. Often this tends to be done by contractors whose main source of income may be roads or urban streetworks and who may be less at home in a rural location. It can in any event often be difficult to find people with appropriate skills to maintain or repair paths or traditional facilities near the paths. There is a potential for rural skills training to include path work, including what are the best answers to particular path surface problems, the most appropriate materials to use in a given landscape and environment, stone walling, hedge laying, etc. Such work could well attract people from the local rural community and a guaranteed future for the local National Trail would give them confidence that such work would continue to be available.

Local environment and character

All National Trails have local distinctiveness and appeal that encourages many people to keep returning and to also seek to walk more than one Path. National Trails are our country’s greatest walking assets and should have a highly regarded, high quality National status.

DEFRA Role

Valuing our Trails as the Nation’s greatest walking assets will enable us to achieve far more. Government commitment to the England Coast Path means that DEFRA is committed to creating even more National Trail. If we wish National Trails to be in at least as good condition and more highly valued than now we will require a different approach. 75% of the length of the National Trails travel through a protected landscape, yet National Parks and AONBs are organised differently at national level. There is an opportunity to consider different options for co-ordinating the efforts of Trails.

We need to take a collective approach to evidence the value of National Trails, generate funding for shared projects, share promotion and fundraising tools and volunteer systems. Trails are not just about long distance walkers they are vital assets for everyone and we have a duty to reach more people, especially young people. Recognition is an important part of this, therefore achieving national or international awards and accreditation is vital.

It is a statutory responsibility to maintain the Trails and provide information about them, further added value can be gained through volunteering and fundraising for improvement or promotion projects. The New Deal has been good for Trails and we are really gearing up now to innovate, seek external finance and achieve more independence. 3 year funding
with reduced restrictions on use for promotion activities will give Trails the opportunity to work now to generate additional revenue / support for the future.

**National Trails propose the following solutions:**

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*September 2016*

**References:**

1. Backing the Tourism Sector A Five Point Plan, Department for Culture, Media & Sport.  
2. South West Coast Path Monitoring and Evaluation Report 2010-2014  
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3. ORVal Short Case Study: Number 3 National Trails: Worth maintaining?