Written evidence submitted by the VisitWiltshire (RUT0239)

Introduction
- VisitWiltshire is the official Destination Management & Marketing Organisation for Wiltshire, representing over 600 industry partners.
- We are a private company limited by guarantee with a private sector Board, founded 2011. Our geographic focus covers Swindon & Wiltshire.
- The VisitWiltshire Chair is a Board member of the Swindon & Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership

Rural Tourism in Wiltshire
- As a predominantly rural county, rural tourism makes a significant contribution to Wiltshire’s overall economy. In 2015 Swindon & Wiltshire’s visitor economy was worth £1.53billion and supported 29,000 jobs. Just over 8% of all employment.
- Approximately 60% of tourism visits and spend in Wiltshire is described as being to the countryside.
- The benefits of rural tourism – including visitor spend and job creation - are spread fairly evenly across the whole county.
- Tourism is growing at a faster rate than many other industries in Wiltshire, and if adequately resourced has the potential for significantly stronger growth.
- Wiltshire’s Destination Management & Development Plan 2015-20 identifies significant potential for rural economy growth, including a significant under-supply of rural visitor accommodation and a number of opportunities for tourism business growth.

1. Tourism Funding & Marketing

Destination Management Organisations
Since 2008 there have been a number of changes that have impacted on funding for rural tourism. The closure of RDAs resulted in a loss of statutory responsibility and £65m p/a for tourism funding; Local Authority support for tourism has declined by 50%, and there have been significant changes in funding for the national tourist boards, VisitEngland and VisitBritain. Funding that is available is largely now in the form of grants for specific programmes.

As a result, sub-national Destination Management Organisations across the country are either struggling to survive or are increasingly having to focus on short-term tactical marketing only. This is having a significant impact across the country on tourism promotion and coordination, quality, business support, and visitor economy growth.

There is no longer sufficient funding for destination management and marketing at a sub-national destination level or at the national VisitEngland level. This is making some rural destinations uncompetitive domestically, and making England’s rural offer uncompetitive internationally.

The government’s new tourism strategy that aims to spread the benefits of inbound tourism around the country is at risk without a functioning network of DMOs to support VE/VB.
The government needs to ensure there is a network of destination organisations that is sufficient resourced to manage rural destinations and drive rural tourism growth.

**VisitBritain/VisitEngland**
At a national level, either VisitEngland’s marketing role should be reinstated, or VisitBritain should be tasked with introducing marketing campaigns tailored for the domestic market, in partnership with DMOs.

Core funding for VB/VE should be increased. Grant funding programmes that support tourism development are welcome but they should be additional to core funding not instead of it.

**EU funding**
Access to ESIF funding is particularly important for a rural county like Wiltshire. Government must ensure that funds that have already been approved under Wiltshire’s ESIF programme to 2020 are released as quickly as possible. Post- Brexit, government must ensure that EU funding streams for rural tourism, eg ESIF and CAP are replaced by national funding streams.

The Swindon & Wiltshire LEP, VisitWiltshire, Wiltshire’s Destination Management & Development Plan, and partners on Wiltshire’s Rural Economy Sector Group have identified food and drink as a key area for development. We understand that post- Brexit DEFRA have cut most of the previously agreed food and drink priorities from Wiltshire’s ESIF bid, including SME development and sector marketing and development. DEFRA need to urgently review their food and drink policy to allocate significant funds to this important sector.

2. **Access**
With 8,200 footpaths, and half the county designated as an AONB, access to the countryside is particularly important for Wiltshire’s rural tourism economy. Funding cuts to our local authority countryside departments are having a detrimental impact on rural access.
- Funding for our Rights of Way is a priority.
- More work also needs to be done on maintaining and improving access by a range of travel options, including cycle and waterways.
- Access development should be done as part of a wider approach to encourage sustainable access, for example by combing product development with promotional campaigns.
- Local funding for rural tourism marketing, management and development must be maintained to ensure that visitors know about, and use, our countryside.

3. **Planning & Regulation**
There are a number of issues related to planning and regulation:
- Insufficient guidance on tourism development within rural areas.
- A disconnect between national policy which is in favour or development, and local policy which is against it.
- Insufficient guidance available for planning and development officers
- Insufficient links between planning officers and other bodies, eg Destination Management plans, DMOs, AONBs etc.
- Insufficient advice available to help guide local businesses and communities on appropriate developments

The Tourism Alliance produced The Good Practice Guide on Planning for Tourism in collaboration with DCLG as guidance on how to develop the visitor economy in a sustainable manner. This was largely ignored when the NPPF was developed. Actions:
- The Good Practice Guide should be reviewed and re-introduced.
- Locally adapted versions of The Good Practice Guide should be produced to provide clarity and direction for local authorities, stakeholders and rural tourism businesses.

4. Infrastructure & Skills

Skills
People 1st estimate that almost 1m new staff will be required by UK tourism businesses by 2022 due to growth and high turnover rates. To help resolve recruitment and training issues:
- Post- Brexit the government must ensure that EU workers continue to be able to work in the UK’s tourism industry.
- The government should provide funding / access to sector specific training opportunities that aligned to priorities identified in Destination Management Plans and that meet the needs of the sector.

Transport
Transport is one of the key barriers to rural tourism development. Wiltshire has a number of public transport issues, including connectivity, sustainability and the current threat to existing bus networks. 80% of rural tourism trips are taken by private transport so focus needs to be on improving visitor private as well as public transport.

DfT’s main transport focus remains on improving business and commuter travel through investing in main rail and road transport links. We therefore need DEFRA to champion rural transport, encouraging DfT and others to also work on improving local transport routes and priorities, for example the TransWilts line and speeding up the south Wiltshire to Waterloo line.

We support the Tourism Alliance call for DEFRA to create a rural transport task group to review opportunities and ways to improve sustainable tourism transport links, reduce social exclusion and support the rural economy. Initiatives that need looking at include tourism signage, improving visitor information, encouraging rural transport integration and providing development funding for sustainable transport development initiatives that will not happen without public sector support.

Broadband
Access to broadband speeds of 10mbps is generally considered to be sufficient to meet the needs of rural tourism businesses and visitors to Wiltshire. However, many of our rural tourism businesses report speeds at well below this figure, making us uncompetitive and acting as a barrier to new rural tourism business growth. More work must be done to provide rural tourism businesses with access to 10mbps broadband speeds.

5. Local Environment & Character
50% of Wiltshire’s land area is defined as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty / World Heritage Site. To ensure funding is well spent, it is essential that national and local rural tourism activity is joined-up, and that DEFRA initiatives that impact on Wiltshire are driven locally from joined-up DMO/WHS/AONB destination plans as well as imposed centrally.

6. DEFRA role
There are currently no formal links between DEFRA funding programmes and local Destination Management Plans and DMO strategies and priorities. This often means that DEFRA rural tourism funding programmes are not aligned with wider tourism growth priorities and activities, duplicate with other activity, are not adequately evaluated, and under-achieve in terms of legacy.

DEFRA should review how they allocate rural tourism related grant programmes to ensure that:
- Funds are aligned with Destination Management Plans & DMO/LEP strategies and priorities
- Funds don’t duplicate with other local initiatives, and that
- Activity is evaluated in-line with accepted tourism performance measurement methodologies
- Legacy and contribution to Destination Management Plans becomes a key element of all future rural tourism bids.

We would like to see DEFRA and DCMS working more closely together to ensure programmes are joined-up at a national level.

There appears to be a move towards cutting SME funding programmes in favour of supporting large business and large infrastructure projects. It is key for a predominantly rural destination like Wiltshire that small as well as large projects that contribute to growth and development continue to be supported.

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