Submission from the Hampshire Rural Forum

The Hampshire Rural Forum comprises of those organisations, groups and individuals who have a concern for the economic prosperity and well-being of businesses and communities in rural Hampshire. The Forum brings together the many pieces of the ‘rural-jigsaw’ to fulfil its overall aim to ‘enable Hampshire’s rural communities to become more visible, effective and sustainable socially, economically and environmentally’.

Context

- Hampshire is a predominantly rural county with 85% of its area classified as such, although only 23% (300,000) of the population live in rural areas.

- Tourism is worth over £3 billion to the Hampshire economy, which equates to 5% of the county’s economy, and employs nearly 10% of the workforce.

- Hampshire is particularly dependent on the day visitor market, spending some £1.8 billion per annum. Domestic overnight visitors spend over £600 million, whilst overseas visitors spend some £250 million.

- The New Forest National Park is almost wholly within Hampshire, along with a significant proportion of the South Downs National Park. Tourism is an important part of Hampshire’s rural economy, particularly in the National Parks. Hampshire’s geographic proximity to the London market is particularly important as a source of visitors.

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

1.1 Rural tourism promotion has been negatively impacted by changes to agencies - there has been a leadership vacuum since the demise of the Regional Development Agencies and their associated Tourist Boards. Locally managed initiatives such as www.visit-hampshire.co.uk are of vital importance in promoting rural tourism across Hampshire, however a strategic lead is also needed e.g. a role for the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP’s) or a new regional tourism structure. The 8-Point Plan for England’s National Park 2016-2020 is a start, offering opportunities for cross-collaborative working between agencies, government departments, Nationals Parks, LEP’s and local organisations.

1.2 Due to the fragmented nature of rural tourism businesses, local authorities, national parks and other agencies need to play a greater role in promoting destinations as a whole - in rural areas tourism businesses are made up of small and micro businesses. The rise of social media means it is easier and cheaper for businesses to do their own marketing. Whilst this works for individual businesses, a coordinated approach is also needed to ensure a complete offer is promoted to visitors, in particular linking attractions, accommodation and local food. Location based collaborations such as Visit Winchester and the Heart of Hampshire Destination Management Partnership (Winchester City Council, East Hampshire District Council and the South Downs National Park) do work to provide linked products but this is becoming more difficult as local authorities are under pressure from budget cuts and require private sector input which is increasingly hard to secure. There are also issues around
organisational priorities versus business needs. For example National Parks focus on car free tourism, protecting the landscape etc. but businesses may call for more signage and parking. The interests of both are therefore best served by campaigns that promote destinations as a whole and encourage use of public transport.

1.3 **Membership-based tourism organisations (e.g. Tourism South East) do not benefit smaller operators, likely to be in rural destinations** - these organisations have an obligation to their paying members and partners which influences any promotional activity. Smaller operators may be reluctant to pay the membership fees, managing their own promotions through websites, online booking sites and social media. This activity, however, will not necessarily promote rural destinations or inspire linked visits.

1.4 **More funding is needed for medium-scale projects that promote rural tourism** - the first round of the Discover England Fund, for small-scale quick-win projects and pilots up to £250k, attracted an exceptional number of bids that far exceeded the allocated funding available. This indicates there is demand for medium-scale funding opportunities, beyond LEADER, that promote rural tourism. Year two and three of the Fund however, will focus on a small number of larger bids.

1.5 **National Trails need support from government to fund marketing expenditure** - the South Downs Way and indeed all the National Trails, including the England Coast Path, are key rural tourism assets. Since the cabinet office ban on government departments funding promotion or marketing, major grant funding from Natural England via (DEFRA) has included a ban on marketing expenditure. This is extremely counterproductive as National Trails could contribute much more to the rural economy with well executed marketing.

1.6 **Visit England should continue to be adequately funded to raise awareness of the countryside as a compelling place to discover and explore** - there is a lot of talk about encouraging visitors out of London. The routes to historic cities are well known but the countryside is more difficult to package and individual countryside destinations are not well known. The Visit England website currently highlights experiences but more thought needs to be given to how this links to specific destinations.

1.7 **Ensure national campaigns take advantage of opportunities to promote rural destinations** - the Great British Food Campaign for example quotes food tourism as a leading element of the food culture strand of the campaign but more could be done to link this to the promotion of rural destinations. The ‘Championing Great British Food Tourism Grant Scheme’ is a step towards this and further rounds of funding would be welcomed. In Hampshire local produce is one of its strongest assets. Organisations such as Hampshire Fare and Hampshire Farmers’ Markets play a vital role in promoting local produce and linking this to rural areas, restaurants, accommodation etc. as well as providing business support to producers to help them grow.

1.8 **Continued provision of visitor information points is needed** – this has been a local government function but is under increasing pressure from budget cuts. Websites work well but a face to face information service is still needed and overseas visitors expect this.

2 **Access: What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the countryside and coast?**
2.1 Improve public transport in rural areas - lack of public transport in rural areas is a big problem and visitors without access to a car struggle getting to and around rural areas. A basic level of service for all rural communities is needed; this could act as a platform for economic growth in tourism as well as for community access to basic services.

2.1.1 Example 1: Bus services in parts of the South Downs National Park (Hampshire) are generally infrequent, with few weekend and evening services. Some communities are not served by any bus service or the service runs only one or two days a week. For visitors without access to a private car, this means that large areas of the South Downs remain out of reach. When the time-limited Department for Transport’s Local Sustainable Transport Fund was used to run the South Downs Rambler and Weekender seasonal services in 2015 these were welcomed by communities and visitors alike. Enquiries in 2016 indicate that, had funding been available this year, the service would have had the opportunity to grow passengers.

2.1.2 Example 2: Butser Ancient Farm is a small rural, not for profit business/tourist attraction in East Hampshire. It is difficult to reach without a car - the bus service from Petersfield does not run seven days a week (also causing problems for staff getting to work on a Sunday) and the walk from the bus stop is not safe as there is no footway alongside the road.

2.2 Improve walking and cycling connectivity between urban and rural areas – more shared use off-road paths would encourage visits to the coast and countryside without a car. The Miles without Stiles programme in the South Downs promotes easy access routes without boundaries, and could be rolled out to include linking communities and local facilities (e.g. schools and local parks). This would have a positive impact on the visitor economy as well as improving health, reducing congestion and traffic in rural areas.

2.3 Ensure rights of way are adequately funded – the rights of way network in Hampshire (4,500km) is important to support walking and cycling in rural destinations. Funding to support the maintenance of rights of way is under pressure due to cuts to local authority budgets and there is greater reliance on volunteers. More support could be offered to landowners to maintain the rights of way on their land. More education for visitors on responsible use of the countryside could also be offered to ease concerns of landowners.

2.4 National Trails should continue to be adequately funded - National Trails are popular tourist destinations due to their quality and ease of use. They are maintained and signed to the highest standards and well above what is required for Highway Authorities. This maintenance is therefore funded through a Natural England grant but is being reduced. Other funding streams do not fund on-going maintenance costs, but without them the quality and main selling point of this important rural tourism product will be lost. It is vital that a basic level of funding is maintained at a national level to cover these costs so that local trail partnerships can then draw in additional funding for improvement projects.

3 Funding and fiscal policies: How can public funding be best targeted to get new rural businesses off the ground and keep them going? Are changes needed to tax levels and business rates?

3.1 Ensure a simple grant programme is available for small businesses and start-ups - the current grants systems (LEADER and EAFRD) are overcomplicated and virtually inaccessible for start-ups. This is to be regretted as the previous round of LEADER funding played an important role in supporting small and medium tourism ventures that linked outputs very
much to the local rural economy. Any replacement to these schemes needs to be simple and more client responsive, together with recognising the seasonal nature of the rural tourism sector and outcome focussed. In addition, any replacement scheme should build on the Local Development Strategies (LDS) that provided the strategic and local community led economic delivery mechanisms underpinning the bid for the current LEADER round. Sadly, as mentioned, this has become overburdened by central compliance demands which has limited local action and responsiveness.

3.2 **Ensure business support is available for small and micro businesses in rural areas** – there is currently almost no business advice available for small and micro businesses in rural areas; this has largely been left to district and borough councils. The Local Enterprise Partnerships in Hampshire are largely urban focussed and rural tourism is not identified as a priority. Public funding should be targeted to ensure the right business support systems are in place, including business advice, skills and training opportunities, as well as infrastructure such as mobile and broadband connectivity that meets the needs of rural businesses and communities.

3.3 **Consider changes to VAT rates for hospitality businesses** - VAT rates are a continuing issue for all hospitality businesses. The UK is a relatively expensive place to visit as VAT rates on hospitality overseas tend to be lower.

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?**

4.1 **Ensure Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans acknowledge and plan for sustainable tourism activity** – these plans should ensure that sustainable transport and access is addressed, alongside visitor infrastructure such as information points, toilet facilities and services. They should also support the purposes and duties of National Parks, taking into account the local environment, character and special qualities.

4.2 **Provide greater support for farm diversification to tourism initiatives** – the South Downs NPA Food Enterprise Zone project has shown that planning is a perceptual barrier to farm diversification and measures are needed to improve the accessibility to, and understanding of the planning system (especially Permitted Development Rights) amongst farmers.

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?**

5.1 Apprenticeship opportunities are needed that take into consideration the seasonal aspects of the rural tourism sector, transport and accessibility issues.

5.2 Link training that meets the needs of the rural employment sector to local schools and colleges.

5.3 Address access to transport for staff, including carpooling schemes, in rural areas where this is a barrier to recruitment.

5.4 Provision of transport to meet the needs of visitors is also needed, to reduce the number of visits by car and associated parking spaces, which for some attractions can be a problem (see
also paragraph 2.1). The Marwell Zoo summer bus is a bespoke service running from Eastleigh station. It is well used and many passengers without access to a car report that they would not otherwise have visited the Zoo. Public transport initiatives linking a number of attractions should also be encouraged and properly supported. The Three Rivers Rail Partnership for example provides a free rail link bus to a number of attractions in rural Test Valley.

5.5 Greater waste management support for small businesses is needed. Butser Ancient Farm for example has found that a greater level of waste resulting from increasing visitor numbers is difficult and expensive for small businesses to deal with.

5.6 The provision of affordable housing is critical to the survival of rural communities, the availability of workers for the tourism industry and in reducing the need to travel. Strategic approaches to social housing, via partnerships with providers are being considered in parts of Hampshire. There is also scope for small scale, community-led solutions such as Community Land Trust developments on Rural Exception Sites, but there is no coherent regional support network for this.

5.7 In rural areas where electricity and other services can be problematic, providers should be co-ordinated to seek solutions together.

5.8 Mobile and broadband connectivity in rural areas is critical to businesses as well as visitors who are increasingly reliant on mobile phones to access information (e.g. visitor attraction opening times, mapping solutions etc.).

- The BDUK programme in Hampshire is expected to be completed by September 2018, by which point an estimated 570,000 premises should have access to superfast services. Solutions will need to be found for the final 4% not covered by this programme - these will be rural areas (often isolated communities where rural tourism can thrive) where traditional fixed line methods can quickly become prohibitively expensive.

- Act on lessons learned from the DCMS Innovation Fund Pilot – Hampshire was awarded an additional £1.2 million as part of this pilot and the results are now being evaluated (a preliminary study indicated that Callflow’s methodology adopted in Hampshire is the most cost-effective of the seven national pilots).

- Qualify how the Universal Service Commitment of 10Mbps by 2020 will be achieved (as mentioned in the Queen’s speech).

- Trial further approaches to improve rural business superfast connectivity (e.g. similar to the BDUK Broadband Voucher Scheme – this is currently being trialled in parts of the South Downs National Park with Coast to Capital funding via the ‘Growth is Digital’ programme).

- Government has committed to achieving greater rural mobile coverage through the 5G licensing round. As 5G gives broadband type data speeds then there is, increasingly, a confluence of technologies.

- With a shift from fibre-based to wireless connections, an increasing emphasis on masts (and associated infrastructure) will lead to aesthetics versus utility debates.

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?

6.1 **Ensure continued Government support for farmers** - farming has shaped the landscape and plays a crucial role in maintaining the quality of the rural environment. Continued Government support is needed to ensure this is maintained.
6.2 **Acknowledge farming and tourism inter-linkages and consider diversification that supports agricultural opportunities in national and local plans** - diversification could include rural tourism elements such as products, arts, crafts, and a diversity of experimental tourism activities that might enhance the economic viability of farm and rural communities.

6.3 **Develop national and local plans and sustainable tourism strategies** - these should reflect the unique characteristics of the area and encourage a shared responsibility to protect the balance between tourism growth and the local environment.

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?**

7.1 **Prioritise business advice for tourism and land-management small and micro businesses.**

7.2 **Ensure that the Department for Transport and the Local Enterprise Partnerships recognise transport needs in rural areas and makes appropriate capital funding available to support new infrastructure such as shared use paths for walking and cycling and commits to revenue support for rural bus services.**

7.3 **Make a case for the benefits of creating opportunities for increasing walking and cycling in rural areas, particularly by providing shared use link routes from urban centres to rural areas or improving access to popular existing rural routes (current Government ambition to raise levels of walking and cycling is focused on delivery in urban areas). Improved provision would have a positive impact on health and physical activity levels as well as a diversity of rural tourism activities such as hiking, walking, cycling, wilderness events and stargazing.**

7.4 **Work with and support DCMS to ensure the countryside is recognised as a key tourism destination and champion the needs of the tourism industry as a whole.**

7.5 **Develop an over-arching sustainable rural tourism strategy that encourages a joined up approach across government departments towards addressing the issues raised by this inquiry into rural tourism.**

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