1. **Introduction**

Visit County Durham is the destination management organisation (DMO) for Durham. We work closely with VisitEngland / VisitBritain and a wide range of public and private sector partners and tourism businesses, both in Durham and across England, to grow the county’s visitor economy. We also coordinate the promotion of the county nationally and internationally as a great place to live, work, visit, study and invest. We perform the roles of destination management, destination marketing and place marketing.

Durham is a rural destination that sits in the heart of the North East across a total area of 862 square miles, with a population of 513,200 people in 12 main towns and more than 300 smaller settlements; many of which are former colliery villages. It bridges the urban areas of Tees Valley to the South and Tyne and Wear to the North. The East of the County is designated as Durham Heritage Coastline, whilst the West of the County borders Cumbria and is an area of outstanding natural beauty.

2. **Evidence on specific issues**

2.1 **Marketing**

Individual businesses do not market a destination; the private sector is mainly focussed on its own bottom line. This is more pertinent in rural areas where the tourism sector consists of mainly micro or lifestyle organisations who have limited resource and skills to market even their own business.

Strategic destination marketing raises the profile of the place nationally and, budgets permitting, internationally. Much of the funding available for rural growth and development specifically excludes marketing activity, and in times of austerity Destination Management and Marketing Organisations have limited budgets to carry out effective marketing without access to external funding.

Rather than creating new structures and project based delivery organisations a more sustainable approach would be to foster greater collaboration between existing organisations involved in rural development and promotion. Many of these organisations are established and can provide cost-effective online routes to market for small and micro businesses that cannot access high speed broadband directly or do not have sufficient resource or skills to fulfil this function.

In 2015 the Government made changes to the national structure and decided that VisitEngland should no longer undertake domestic tourism marketing,
national marketing focus shifted to international audiences. This has left smaller, rural destinations struggling for a presence as much of the product taken to market is the honeypot destinations that are already known to international audiences, leaving little room for smaller destinations to compete or even gain a presence. If we are to raise awareness and increase visitor numbers to the rural areas it is critical that national marketing activity spreads to lesser known destinations.

2.2 Access
Improved public transport and supporting infrastructure would provide better access to the coast and countryside. Many of the rural areas in Durham are remote and not serviced by public transport therefore only accessible if you travel by car, which directly contradicts the principles of sustainable tourism development that recommends and encourages car free travel.

Investment to develop a dedicated network of cycling and walking routes that are suitable for all ages and levels of mobility, connecting urban centres with rural and coastal areas will improve access and encourage the private sector to develop businesses to service the needs of these visitors.

Better information, both on and off-line would help visitors to explore further, however, rural mobile connectivity limits opportunities for most rural destinations.

2.3 Funding and fiscal policies
Project funding such as LEADER, EAFRD and Regional Growth Fund have successfully supported tourism businesses which has encouraged and stimulated growth in rural areas. But these funding streams specifically exclude marketing and promotion of the new product once it is complete, the responsibility for marketing lies with the beneficiary of the grant funding and the goodwill of DMO’s to incorporate in to destination marketing plans.

Project funding for new organisations and partnerships duplicates the work carried out by existing organisations. To help strengthen the network of existing DMOs greater collaboration with protected landscape partners and community organisations could be facilitated rather than funding a temporary programme of work.

We know that a vibrant visitor economy supports and underpins everything from inward investment to quality of life for local residents. It is therefore critical that the public and private sector continue to invest in tourism in order to create favourable conditions for economic growth.
Evidencing productivity in the tourism sector is an ongoing challenge despite the fact that tourism is one of the UK’s largest industries with residents and overseas visitors spending £127.4bn (7.1% of GDP) annually. This expenditure creates employment for 3.1m people (9.6% of the UK’s workforce). Little consideration is given to the fragmented nature and micro business composition of the industry where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

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.

2.4 Planning and regulations
Appropriate and sensitive development in protected areas should be encouraged as they create jobs and add to the local economy in areas that would otherwise offer no opportunities for sustainable communities. 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 as a means of stopping all development.

2.5 Infrastructure and skills
The lack of broadband provision in rural areas places rural tourism businesses at a competitive disadvantage and is creating a digital divide between the rural and urban areas, with some rural areas struggling with connection speeds as low as 2 megabits or no connectivity at all.

Mobile connectivity for visitors is a critical factor in the decision making process and the quality of their visit once they are in a destinations. Serious attention should be given to how these issues can be resolved in an age where such significant progress with the use of satellite applications and digital technology is being made.

Reliable and stable, high-speed, digital connectivity is a game-changer for the growth of rural economy across all sectors, and without this growth the rural economy will remain stagnant or continue to decline.

2.6 Local environment and character
There are substantial opportunities to grow rural tourism across England. Honey pot destinations 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. Again, fostering broad collaboration between DMOs, protected landscape organisations, local authorities and community groups would ensure that the needs of potentially opposing factors are considered and addressed in the most suitable way.

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