Norfolk County Council (NCC) supports the county-wide promotional activity of Visit Norfolk. NCC is also the Accountable Body for £9m LEADER funding being distributed through 5 Local Action Groups in Norfolk and North Suffolk. We are building on considerable LEADER success in the 2009-2013 funding period, when LEADER in Norfolk and North Suffolk successfully supported 136 projects with £6.28m funding. The programme attracted an additional private investment of £10.5m across the three areas, 363 jobs were created or sustained, and 45 micro enterprises were supported and created. Much of this investment was in rural tourism.

Rural Tourism was also identified as a priority sector in the 2013-2020 Norfolk Rural Development Strategy which Norfolk County Council helped to develop and whose delivery we support.

We are therefore responding to the Defra Rural Tourism Inquiry with a particular emphasis on our experience of the value of strategic investment in rural tourism and promotion, and its benefits for the wider economy.

**Rural tourism in Norfolk**

Tourism is worth £2.9 billion to the Norfolk economy (2014 figures). This is largely spend from UK day trippers and staying visitors, with overseas visits a relatively small segment of the current market (4%). There are over 41,000 direct tourism-related jobs in Norfolk, 17% of all jobs in the area. Much of this economic activity is in rural areas, with 12 out of 14 of Norfolk’s largest tourism attractions in rural locations. Many rural businesses rely at least in part on tourism for their income. Farm diversification into tourism-related activity is also a key factor in making farm businesses sustainable.

Tourism can be seen as a low paid and seasonal sector, and therefore a lower priority for economic investment than other sectors. National research has indeed shown that rural tourism is more seasonal than urban tourism, with 70% concentrated in spring and summer. However, in Norfolk we have had some success lengthening the tourist season for local and UK visitors with some seaside destinations in particular doing well with out of season day trippers. We also know that initiatives which drive up the quality and uniqueness of the tourism offer can also help support more higher paid jobs.

It is also the case that, while we may wish to grow other high value sectors, tourism remains a key part of the rural economy, not just for the economic value of tourism spend, but also for the knock-on benefits to other sectors of the economy, and through helping to attract employees and businesses to an area where it is pleasant to live.

Tourism is a competitive sector, with competition at home and abroad fierce. Visitor expectations for high quality and regularly refurbished and updated attractions, accommodation and catering increase all the time and no tourism business can afford to stand still without careful investment in product and promotion. The key strategic priorities for Norfolk tourism – increasing overnight stays, extending the tourist season, and
increasing the quality and consistency of provision are all key not only to increasing market share, but to maintaining position.

However, most tourism businesses are charities or small businesses. A high proportion do not carry significant capital to make major investments in upgrades or redevelopment. They rely on funding to supplement their own investment. Where this is successfully delivered, the impact can be significant, as we saw with LEADER investment in the 2009-2013 funding period, outlined above.

Suggested developments and initiatives to support rural tourism

1. **Rural business development funding**
   As outlined above, funds like LEADER and EAFRD (the Rural Growth Programme) are vital to rural tourism. They have a significant positive impact on the quality and sustainability of rural tourism, ensuring that high quality, robust projects, with a sustainable approach and business planning are nurtured and supported. Many such projects also support farm diversification and the sustainability of local food and drink businesses, many with export potential (e.g., micro breweries).

2. **Funding for tourism collaborations**
   LEADER and EAFRD also significantly support collaborative and promotional projects, for which there are few other ready sources of funding. These are vital to ensure we have a ‘joined up’ tourism offer, and effectively promote the attractions and facilities on offer. It also supports best practice, with collaborative activity often led by larger or more successful organisations sharing best practice across the sector. Collaborative tourism projects have a significant impact on visitor numbers and visitor spend. Again, external funding for these is vital – few tourism organisations can afford collaborative project working using solely their own funds.

   We would especially welcome future funding initiatives which support the provision and ongoing development of footpaths and cycleways, and the tourism businesses in and around rural market towns, as well as accommodation projects where there are gaps in provision in smaller towns and near long-distance footpaths. Planning incentives for landlords and property owners to encourage letting property to tourism businesses would also support such initiatives.

3. **Tourism promotion**
   Collaborative tourism funding can also help support membership-based Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) to become self-sustaining, enabling them to develop the core membership offer and promotional platform which enables them to thrive in the longer term on membership fees only. We would urge Defra to ensure that future funding for tourism enables some support to enable DMOs to become self-sustaining. The digital infrastructure of tourism promotion, both national and international, is vital to our tourism economy, and does require investment.

4. **Access to the countryside**
Access to the countryside is a key issue for rural tourism, but it is helpful when this is made possible through grants to landowners and farmers to enable them to provide and maintain good quality managed access without a negative impact on farming and other rural business. The reintroduction of funding for farmers to introduce permissive access, along the lines of the funding previously available in Countryside Stewardship, would be beneficial. It is also very difficult to fund the maintenance of footpaths once established, in particular the major long distance footpaths which are key to rural tourism. Initiatives which enable or incentivise footpath maintenance would be welcome.

5. Transport and infrastructure initiatives
The Coaithopper bus service on the North Norfolk coast provides an excellent example of the private and public sector working together to provide an environmental sustainable public transport service for visitors and local people. Pump priming funding could help develop new partnerships and additional routes for tourists. Investment in sustainable and environmentally responsible tourism initiatives is vital and proves an effective marketing tool as well.

Support for rural public transport is also vital to enable rural tourist businesses to attract and retain staff, who often cannot afford to live near their place of work.

We would welcome effective collaboration with the Department for Transport to increase awareness of existing air/sea links both domestic and international together with increased destination marketing which would help to increase visitors to rural areas. We would also welcome the provision of ongoing support to Regional Airports to encourage new routes and retain existing routes. A new Norwich to Exeter service supported with Department for Transport pump priming funding has improved access to both Norfolk and Devon/Cornwall for visitors all year.

The initial Department for Transport Heritage and Community Rail Tourism Innovation Competition was very popular and attracted a wide range of new ideas to increase visitors to rural areas by rail. A second round would allow organisations such as the Mid Norfolk Railway to apply for funding and increase tourism access to an inland area of Norfolk area that currently sees few tourists.

Allied to the issue of transport infrastructure is the question of tourism signage (brown signs etc), which can be very difficult to change or improve because of the complex permission and funding processes involved. A more flexible and better funded system would be beneficial to rural tourism businesses.

Conclusion
In summary, we believe that relatively modest, rigorously invested public funding for the tourism sector unlocks significant economic benefits, and increases the quality and effectiveness of the national tourism offer, rendering the sector competitive in the longer term. Tourism is a vital element of the rural economy and investment in its growing effectiveness as a sector is a central element of investment in the rural economy.
Defra could play a key role in educating other government departments on the importance of tourism to the wider economy and how it impacts on business creation and investment to rural areas. They could commission research and case studies into successful areas such as South West to show the effects of a healthy tourism sector. Government could also usefully concentrate on bids to attract major events to our rural areas, such as the Tour de France/Tour of Britain Cycling and other events throughout the year that support the visitor economy.

*September 2016*