1. I represent the farm holiday co-operative, Devon Farms Accommodation. We have around 90 farms in Devon all offering B&B or self catering accommodation. Here is our submission to the rural tourism enquiry.

2. What is rural tourism, and why is it so important to those of us operating tourism businesses in the truly rural areas of the country? It is not just obviously because it provides a source of income for our own accommodation businesses, but it supports the entire local rural infrastructure that makes up our way of life. From garages to butcher shops, pubs to churches, the annual influx of visitors and their spend is crucial in making these businesses viable. Our own butcher reckons 30% of his income comes from visitors.

3. Rural tourism therefore to us means visitors who stay and spend in rural areas. This may seem a narrow view as day visits to the countryside by both visitors and those living in local towns and cities can be classed as rural tourists but contribute far less to the rural economy than those visitors actually staying in the rural area.

4. The rural tourism machine is faltering for one very obvious reason, lack of marketing. We can fund all sorts of infrastructure enhancements, but until we start to tell the wider world about our wonderful rural tourism product, there will be little difference. Our organisation Devon Farms has spent a large amount of time and energy trying to get help with marketing, but the main sources of funding for rural tourism, European Structural Funds and the Leader programme, are only for capital projects. Marketing is not allowed. One argument for this is that funding capital projects, ie infrastructure, has a far greater long term effect, but in our experience, the reverse is true. Marketing done 25 years ago has produced many years of returns (our farms generally have 50% repeat visitors at least), and just this year at our own farm three sets of families stayed where one of the parents had stayed here as a child. Capital projects funded 25 years ago are out of date and crumbling.

5. To directly fund marketing is difficult as it would involve competition between different organisations and different parts of the country, and be subject to abuse by tourism bodies that have the ability to submit excellent funding applications, only to use the money to promote their core areas where most of their members would be, coast and cities. I remember the last time there was funding for rural tourism, either VisitEngland or VisitBritain produced a brochure that had three pages devoted to London’s green spaces.

6. So a generic rural tourism marketing campaign is needed that focuses on the real rural England, with a large element of overseas marketing. Before the Foot and Mouth outbreak we had done an overseas visitor survey with our membership, and most had at least 10% of their visitors coming from overseas, mainly Germany and Holland. Now, a recent ‘How’s Business’ survey showed a significant decline in
overseas visitors. Before F&M we used to distribute our brochures to the various BTA brochure distribution centres in Europe. The German one always had our brochure in the top most popular ones. Now of course these offices have gone, but we could have a national presence at all the major holiday trade fairs across the globe with brochure distribution facilities at a reasonable price. This would give real rural tourism organisations like ours the opportunity to get our product into the wider overseas market at a price we could afford – hopefully!

7. A big advantage of overseas visitors is that they are not so attracted to the tourism hotspots od Devon, either because they are not so aware of them as are domestic visitors, or because they really want to experience the quintessential English countryside. Such visitors would go some way filling up the accommodation in the deeply rural areas of Devon. Farms in these areas are always the last to fill, after the farms in coastal or tourism hotspot areas.

8. To answer the three main thrusts of the review:

8.1. Encourage more people to visit …..
   Promoting walking, biking, field sports, riding, trekking, and our beautiful Spring and Autumn seasons will all help to bring visitors into the deep rural areas, and at all times of the year. We already have a pretty good network of footpaths, riding facilities etc., its the marketing that is missing.

8.2. Support to diversify …..
   With successful marketing, more farmers will diversify and more tourism farms will enhance their product. At present there is little incentive as the available rural accommodation is more than enough for the current demand. Increase demand, the rest will follow.

8.3. Ensure balance between environment and character …..
   The physical limit in terms of bedspaces in the countryside is enough to preserve environment and character. Day visitors go more towards popular tourist spots, coastal or rural, and these areas are where they may be problems.

9. To answer specific points:

9.1. Marketing: Agencies will promote the areas where their membership is mainly located. There are very few real rural tourism organisations like Devon Farms and Farm Stay and we tend to be ignored. For example not one agency informed us as Devon Farms that there was any consultation going on re. rural tourism. Not even Visit Devon.
   What is needed is a framework for rural tourism that organisations like us can afford to be involved with. Brochure distribution abroad is an obvious example.

9.2. Access: There is plenty of access. Better access and facilities for the disabled would be a strong selling factor.
9.3. Funding and fiscal policies: Investment in marketing. Getting rid of VAT on accommodation is a common ask, but few of our farms are VAT registered.

9.4. Planning and Regulation: The latest planning changes have yet to work through. National parks already mostly successfully maintain a very difficult balancing act between development and investment.

9.5. Infrastructure and skills: All about supply and demand. Need marketing to create the demand. Cutting TICs has been detrimental to rural tourism.

9.6. Local environment and character: Ability of rural areas to accommodate visitors is a limiting factor in itself. i.e. it is self balancing.

9.7. Defra role: Waste of time really. We have already seen a number of cross department initiatives designed to rural proof policies come to nothing. The real challenge is to get these departments to recognise the importance of rural tourism to rural economies, and this includes Defra.

*September 2016*