Written evidence submitted by the Living Options Devon (RUT0260)

Background

1.1 I am writing a submission on behalf of Countryside Mobility which is an initiative of Living Options Devon (LOD). LOD is a Disability charity (no. 1102489) which aims to provide people with disabilities and Deaf people with the same life chances and opportunities to be active and equal members of society.

1.2 LOD is a User-Led Organisation and Countryside Mobility is one example of an initiative which came from a User who felt that the countryside could be made more accessible taking advantage of the new all-terrain scooters coming onto the market.

1.3 Countryside Mobility has now been running for six years, initially funded by the Big Lottery Access to Nature and has grown into a successful initiative that enables around 2,000 people each year to be able to enjoy the countryside through 37 partner sites around South West England. Site partners include over a dozen National Trust properties (both traditional estates and countryside), country parks, South West Lakes Trust properties and a range of other outdoor attractions. See www.countrysidemobility.org for a full list.

1.4 At each partner site an all-terrain mobility scooter (known as a Tramper) is available to hire by anyone who has difficulty with mobility in the countryside. The scheme has, at any one time, around 1,000 members – the majority of whom are annual members, along with a constantly evolving number of temporary members who take out a 2 week Taster membership.

1.5 Countryside Mobility has been recognised in the ‘Access’ category of the Tourism Excellence Awards (South West England ‘Gold’ – 2015, VisitEngland ‘Highly Commended’ – 2014) and is included in the Access for All Guide published by VisitEngland.

Lessons Learnt

2.1 Our experience of working in this context has demonstrated clearly how important access to the countryside is and we welcome the inclusion of it as an issue within the Inquiry.

2.2 One lesson that has emerged clearly from our work over six years is the breadth of people who benefit from improved accessibility to the countryside. While the scheme was established by a Disability charity, our First Time User Feedback surveys show that only 8% identify themselves as having a disability. Most instead think of themselves as having a mobility difficulty. In many cases, the countryside is the first ‘environment’ in which mobility difficulties can become a barrier due to gradients, uneven surfaces and longer distances. While everyday journeys remain feasible, the countryside becomes
inaccessible if assistance is not provided. To confine the benefit of improving accessibility to wheelchair users is significantly under-estimating the number of people affected, particularly in a population which is aging but increasingly wishes to retain leisure opportunities and an active lifestyle.

2.3 The benefit of all terrain scooters such as the Tramper is that they not only enable people to continue exploring the countryside (with all the associated social and health benefits that are now well-evidenced in research) they also provide a solution which has a lower impact on the environment. The capability of the Trampers removes the need for the intrusion of harder surfaces or new paths being created in the countryside. The most common obstacle that remain a hindrance are gates (particularly for individuals – such as those in the Disabled Ramblers Association - who get to the stage of owning their own scooter and explore more widely and individually. Gates can be designed to be more accessible both in terms of the layout and latches.

2.4 The other consideration in terms of the breadth of benefit is the fact that our research (2016 Membership Survey) shows that the average number of people accompanying the Tramper user is 1.2. However, this quantification and the economic multiplier that it brings to sites under-estimates the social impact of the scheme. For most users, the access provided by the scooters means that they no longer have to be left behind, can only go so far or are holding others back. Instead they can simply enjoy their time together with friends and family in an environment, in many cases, they never thought they would again.

2.5 Please take a few minutes to watch this short film which explains the impact through the first-hand perspective of the users of the scheme: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rG5yyzBkHZ4

Conclusion

3.1 While this submission focusses on the experiences of a particular project, we hope that some of the issues and opportunities raised can be considered when thinking more widely about the significance of access in the context of the countryside whether it be in terms of the wide spectrum of people affected (directly and indirectly) or the extent of difference that it makes to their lives.

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