Background

Marketing Cheshire is the Destination Management Organisation for Cheshire. Cheshire received 47 million visitors in 2015 contributing £2.6 billion into the visitor economy and delivering over 33,000 jobs.

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

This is hugely varied in terms of quality and success across England.

Recent policy changes at a national level have led to a focus on driving international markets into England and whilst hugely important, for rural areas the focus still needs to be on domestic market growth. Domestic marketing is a gap currently. Destination management organisations receive limited funding to develop domestic marketing programmes. The deficit of incoming versus outgoing visitors to the UK needs to be addressed by a two-fold strategy of promoting England to overseas audiences whilst also promoting holidays at home to our domestic markets.

Government need to develop a strategy to support domestic tourism growth using a combination of national bodies such as Visitengland and regional destination management organisations.

2. Access: What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?

Support is required for longer distance trails which are not national trails but are strategically important – in Cheshire’s case this is the Gritstone and Sandstone trail. Investment in these locally distinctive assets would further attract visitors to Cheshire’s countryside.

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

Most public funding for rural comes from European programmes for example the Defra managed EAFRD grant programme which is now not progressing post BREXIT so we need to ensure that these funding schemes are replaced.

The majority of the public funding targeted at rural businesses has a mandate to support small scale tourism developments (i.e. B&B or self catering development)
left a gap for more significant projects and doesn’t always reflect the local opportunities and needs as well as the marketing ask that comes as a result of supporting new product development. Local destinations need to be more actively consulted on the priorities for their destinations. Local authorities would be a better route for the management of these programmes.

The government should consider whether now is the time to implement national policy change such as a consumer bed tax. This is successfully deployed in other countries and the market is used to paying a small per night (50p) levy. This could potentially solve the tourism funding challenge, particularly as bed tax revenue could be utilised to fund more extensive marketing and development programmes for the benefit of the tourism businesses.

4. **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?

We need a more integrated transport network which actively takes the needs of visitors into account. It is difficult to travel across Cheshire by public transport and to reach our rural tourism assets. It is difficult in particular for overseas audiences to negotiate the system which only leads to further concentration of tourism markets in England’s cities.

As a sector we also need truly nationwide broadband and 4G mobile signal coverage. The visitor now expects it. Keeping connected and sharing is an integral part of the overall experience of a place.

More affordable housing in rural areas is required to allow local people to work in ancillary businesses. These are vital to the continued success of the business and also promote local employment and skills training.

5. **Local environment and character**: How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

Our ‘quality of place’ has a direct bearing on our consideration of the visitor economy, particularly in the contribution of the rural environment, culture/heritage, visitor attractions & events. Rural character has a strong influence on quality of place and providing the environment for economic growth in both tourism but additionally other priority sectors.

6. **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?
As a priority, tourism and in particular rural tourism needs greater recognition by all levels of local government, including in all relevant Local Enterprise Partnerships’ strategic plans, of the value of the visitor economy and the millions of jobs it provides, leading to greater support for its development.

Tourism and in particular rural tourism needs to be more recognised for its role in quality of place as a driver for economic growth. Businesses and residents are attracted to nice environments with a good leisure offer therefore investment in tourism provides the environment for business investment and growth.

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