1 Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into Rural Tourism. The New Forest Destination Partnership, wishes to support the Tourism Alliance (TA) submission but also provide further detail of its own 30 year experience in developing a model approach to the sustainable growth of rural tourism in one of the UK’s most heavily visited and sensitive cultural landscapes.

The New Forest Destination Partnership was created by New Forest District Council (NFDC) in 1988 to connect and coordinate public and private sector efforts to develop and promote the best possible quality of visitor experience. The Partnership has around 250 commercial members across all segments of the local visitor economy who work in complete collaboration with each other and NFDC, the New Forest National Park Authority and Forestry Commission.

This partnership has significantly influenced local policy and plans over 30 years. Collectively marketing the New Forest to the world at large, it uses the principles of the VERB model (See Appendix 1) to ensure that the needs and demands of Visitors, the Environment, Residents and Businesses are met in a way which improves the quality of all local life.

A current example of the VERB approach is the inaugural New Forest Food & Drink Festival Week which will be held in November 2016, and involves around 500 businesses and the local community in a week-long celebration of the destination’s amazing producers and hospitality businesses, their unique personalities, recipes, food and drink through 15 themes. For details visit www.thenewforest.co.uk/newforestfoodfest.

In 2015, tourism in New Forest District is estimated to have contributed £528m (about 20%) of the local economy and provided 11,440 jobs or 17.7% of all local employment. The main benefit of this income is that as most tourism businesses are locally owned, the vast majority of this money stays within the district and is recycled continually throughout its wider economy.

The Destination Partnership’s VERB approach and what we term the “Economics of Visitor Happiness” (See Appendix 2) have been recognised on a number of occasions as presenting good practice in the sustainable development of tourism. In 2004, New Forest District Council was awarded Beacon status by the Government for the Promotion of Sustainable Tourism. In 2007, the New Forest was overall winner in the World Responsible Tourism Awards, winning both Destination and Individual Contribution categories against international competition.

2 Background

Tourism Inquiries in the past have often concentrated on financial and environmental impacts and not recognised the social implications and emotional value of great visitor experiences provided by strong and well coordinated destination management at a local level. Similarly, previous solutions have not necessarily taken into account that the tourism and visitor economy, particularly in rural areas, relies on local difference to drive it. Both in scale and nature, a one-size fits all solution cannot be applied across the board. We therefore welcome an inquiry into rural tourism which
takes the diverse range of issues and interests that need to be brought together to provide answers of how to sustainably develop the rural tourism economy and connect it effectively at all levels locally and nationally.

3 Comments on the Inquiry’s Specific Issues

3.1 How can more people, both from the UK and abroad, be encouraged to visit more of England’s rural places, for longer and at all times of the year.

The global tourism market is becoming increasingly competitive, as new destinations are continually developed. This means that it is increasingly hard, particularly for smaller, rural destinations that are not national brands, to register on consumers’ radar. Overcoming these challenges requires there to be adequate resources dedicated not only to driving sustainable tourism growth at a local level, but also to effectively communicate it to an increasingly sophisticated consumer marketplace worldwide.

The advent of the internet has created On-line Travel Agencies (OTAs) that are dominating channels to market. In controlling distribution, OTAs are making it more and more difficult for individual businesses and destinations to be heard in the marketplace. With their growing control, such distribution channels can also demand an ever-growing commission from businesses to provide their services. Such commissions result in reduced profits and therefore less money to invest in product and service improvements as well as extracting millions of pounds from local economies.

The consequence is that there are sizeable negative impacts on local supply chains which form such a significant part of the UK’s rural economies. Government and VE/VB need to give far more recognition to the role of local Destination Management Organisations in being the arbitors of a sustainable approach to the management and development of rural destinations.

It was in response to these negative impacts, particularly on rural businesses and destinations, that the New Forest in partnership with VisitCornwall and Cumbria Tourism created the FairBookingUK campaign. The campaign’s associated website www.fairbookinguk.com creates channels which allow consumers to book directly with local accommodation providers, promising the best possible online price for visitors and the fairest deal for local businesses.

We would recommend that the Inquiry promotes much greater use of the FairBookingUK model, particularly for rural destinations to ensure that the majority of visitor expenditure finds its way to the businesses and services they are buying. Further benefit being that through local ownership most income is recycled throughout the immediate rural economy.

FairBookingUK also acts as a coordinated marketing and communications tool to promote such as the New Forest Food & Drink Festival Week take place at quieter times of the year to ensure a more even spread of income and jobs so vital in the mid-week and out of season periods of the tourism year.

3.2 How can farmers and rural residents be encouraged to diversify into tourism and grow their businesses

Over the last 30 years NFDC has supported, in both policy terms and practical support, the diversification of rural businesses into the visitor economy. Interestingly, in 2015, it was estimated that only around 1% of the New Forest economy could be attributable to Agriculture. Indeed, the by-line we use to express this fact is “Tourism is the new agriculture”.
There are many mechanisms we have developed locally from the Brand New Forest campaign, which promotes visitor spending only to locally owned businesses, to connecting planning applications directly with the principles of diversification in rural areas. This has enabled a number of very successful examples of farm diversification into the visitor economy, particularly in the local produce and self-catering sectors of the industry.

The New Forest Destination Partnership provides a membership structure which enables businesses wishing to diversify to learn from practical case studies and the experience of other member businesses which have already taken advantage of the visitor economy. This membership structure also provides the route to market and the opportunity of coopetition (the benefits of collaboration mixed with the improvements in quality brought by competition) to improve their individual business models and work more closely together.

3.3 How can the needs of visitors be balanced with the need to preserve the environment and character of local communities

The VERB model (see Appendix 2) was developed to precisely meet this need and provides the basis of all local tourism policy, service delivery and promotional activity. In simple terms any decision has to pass the test of whether it benefits the visitor experience, the environment in which it will take place, the resident living nearby and the business community. If the answer to any of these four propositions is negative, then the decision should not proceed.

3.4 Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destination across England?

There is currently a major problem at a national and local level in the provision of an effective mechanism to deliver the rural tourism story. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the general loss of funding for rural tourism support by local authorities has reduced the ability of rural areas to communicate effectively with the marketplace. The reduction of this tourism hub role by local authorities has also meant that businesses tend to focus on their own individual interests and not work together.

This basic problem is exacerbated by a lack of a functioning national network, with budgets and responsibilities split between national and sub-national organisations via a joined-up partnership. Unfortunately it seems current arrangements between the various responsible Government Departments, VisitBritain and VisitEngland, are unable to solve this ever-growing problem. If such a network existed it would be so much easier to encourage destinations and their businesses to collaborate far more effectively, reducing costs but improving reach in telling the rural visitor experience story. For instance, one destination’s visitors are another destination’s residents and much more could be done to make effective use of this simple reality in marketing all domestic tourism.

Such a network could also be used for the identification of innovation and spreading of best practice, the evolution of consumer-driven, industry backed standards and for measuring and advocating the benefit of collective action by destinations and individual businesses. A further benefit would be to identify gaps in education, skills and training and encourage their provision in a nationally and locally strategic context which could then link with the work of LEPs at a local level and other Government departments and, of course, particularly with the outcomes of this EFRA Inquiry. All in all this would allow the effective coordination around common interests to create economies of scale on a multi-destination basis which would also incorporate a system for effective communication and marketing.
3.5  **Access:** What if any changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?

There are significant improvements required in developing the infrastructure of and connecting all road, rail, sea and air transport in the UK. This is particularly an issue in creating access arrangements which have a high enough profile to reach and attract potential overseas visitors. At a local level in the New Forest much has been done to create car-free access over the last two decades to the unique and very special New Forest environment. NFDC originally funded two open-top buses over a decade ago, which have paved the way for what is now the highly successful six-bus three-route New Forest Tour operated by the National Park Authority and promoted heavily by the Destination Partnership in all of its marketing activities.

The partnership has also spent the last two decades opening up over 100 miles of off-road cycle routes throughout the forest, linked to accommodation providers and attraction businesses. The New Forest National Park Authority and the Destination Partnership have recently launched a comprehensive Cyclists and Walkers Welcome Programme to develop this principle.

Space precludes a summary of the Cyclists & Walkers Programme but we would be happy to provide more details if required.

3.6  **Funding and Fiscal Policies:** How can public funding be best targeted to get new rural tourism businesses off the ground and keep them going? Are changes needed to tax levels and business rates?

The New Forest Destination Partnership strongly supports the reduction of VAT on all hospitality businesses as demonstrated by the Tourism Alliance’s recent efforts to promote the net gain provided in tax receipts from the growth in expenditure generated by such a reduction.

3.7  **Planning and Regulation:** What, if any, changes are needed to planning and other regulations covering rural areas of special character, such as National Parks to encourage sustainable tourism?

Over the last 30 years NFDC has developed a comprehensive range of planning policies (also adopted in broad terms by the New Forest National Park Authority in 2006) to support both the growth of sustainable tourism and the effective maintenance and management of an area which contains a wide range of landscape designations.

Space precludes a summary of these but we would be happy to provide more detail if required.

3.8  **Skills:** How can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?

The Destination Partnership has developed a closer relationship between its member businesses and Brockenhurst College to operate an effective apprenticeship scheme in both service and food sectors of the visitor economy. However, a key barrier in rural areas is the lack of public transport, particularly during unsociable hours. A simple moped for hire transport for tourism scheme has met with some success, however until planning policies allow more staff accommodation to be built on site, it is likely that rural areas will suffer from an inability to attract local skills development and continue to rely on a predominantly non-UK workforce.

3.9  **Broadband and Digital Skills Development**
The Broadband Development UK (BDUK) Programme has clearly demonstrated the difficulties of providing effective digital networks in rural areas and the New Forest is no exception. We estimate that up to 20% of local businesses have a woefully inadequate broadband service. The Destination Partnership has worked through its Brand New Forest Broadband Programme to improve both the understanding of BT Openreach and BDUK of local problems in creating supply solutions and to develop a Community Broadband Tool Kit to enable local communities to develop their own self-funded solutions outside of the BDUK Programme.

Space precludes a summary of the Brand New Forest Broadband Campaign, but we would be happy to provide more detail if required.

3.10 Defra Role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do to ensure Government departments (including DCLG, BIS, DCMS and HM Treasury) support rural tourism?

Fundamentally the Government in total needs to respond to the basic question: Does it wish to have a functioning tourism structure at a national, sub-regional and local level? If not, it is unlikely that rural businesses and destinations will ever be able to compete in an ever-more competitive world market. Which will mean that rural areas (and indeed everywhere else) will miss out on the substantial sustainable tourism dividend of growth, jobs and income.

However a coordinated approach by all Government departments in the provision of an effective national structure and network will create the economies of scale for delivering coordinated action. This will allow the right support to be delivered to rural destinations, both in meeting their development needs and creating greater consumer recognition.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in this process, particularly in providing further comments or, to help develop the range of potential options and solutions that the Inquiry might consider.

We remain committed to playing our part in resolving the barriers to the effective development of a national and local destination management structure which will benefit the sustainable development of rural tourism and we look forward to hearing from you.