Written Evidence from Anna Kelly (RUT 0303)

1. I am delighted the committee have chosen to investigate this far-reaching topic. As a lifelong resident of the West Somerset area, and having worked in several businesses heavily reliant on tourism, I have a personal connection with several of the issues the committee are engaging with. I would therefore like to make a submission of evidence addressing the **infrastructure and skills deficit** many rural areas face. Using West Somerset as a case study, I make three different, but inter-connected points:

   a. By increasing public transport, and awareness of these new services, more tourists will visit rural areas. (Paragraphs 2 – 6).
   b. Increased public transport will stimulate authentic rural growth reducing the trade-off between increased visitor numbers and loss of local character. (Paragraphs 7 – 11).
   c. Increased public transport will address the rural skills deficit. (Paragraphs 12 – 15).

How public transport will increase visitor numbers:

2. **Mobility is essential** to the rural tourism industry because many rural attractions are located in isolated areas. For those without a car, rural tourism is inaccessible.

3. To ensure the rural tourism industry grows, **frequent and affordable** transport connections are essential. During my four years working in the tourism industry in West Somerset, I recall numerous conversations with visitors complaining about how difficult getting around the area was. To successfully increase visitor numbers to rural areas by investing in public transport, the committee might like to consider the following:

4. First, investment in reliable and modern bus services that make getting around easier would likely **encourage more tourists to stay for longer**. West Somerset Council express a desire to reposition Minehead as a ‘multi-faceted destination’
attracting ‘different target markets – from families to active older (higher spending) visitors’. These are exactly the demographics that would benefit from more convenient transport connections.

5. Secondly, should the committee recommend increased public transport, there is a need to be more ambitious and innovative in raising public awareness of services. A leaflet in a Tourist Information Centre is insufficient, as the uncertainty of travel prior to arrival is off-putting to many potential visitors. Therefore, more should be done to digitalise public transport timetables placing them on easily accessible tourism websites.

6. As an aside, should the committee choose to act on my recommendation, some funding could be derived from businesses harming rural tourism. The Hinkley Tourism Action Partnership will provide up to £700,000 for authorities in West Somerset and Sedgemoor to mitigate against the negative impacts Hinkley Point C will have on tourism. Of course, most rural tourist destinations are not impacted by a nuclear power station, however several are affected by contentious projects, including fracking. Encouraging corporate responsibility is an excellent way to finance the necessary public transport to ensure visitor populations are not exposed to such controversial projects.

How public transport might facilitate authentic rural growth:

7. Because many people visit rural areas for the attractive scenery, sustainability is paramount. At peak change over times congestion on single carriageway rural roads can cause delays and spoil views. Investment in public transport may persuade people not to drive thereby addressing the conflict between increasing visitor numbers and preserving local character.

8. West Somerset Council’s Economic Plan for Minehead identifies that in 2014 overnight visits totalled around 370,000 whilst day trips amounted to 2.5 million. The report goes on to outline that one of the areas low level weaknesses is that it is
not ‘a destination that is easy to get to by public transport’. Increasing transport provision has an important role to play in increasing overnight stays in particular. Bringing more people in will protect existing jobs and enhance local employment opportunities.

9. Younger people would likely consider career paths in the rural tourism industry if transport connections permitted it. Connecting rural attractions with public transport would drive authentic rural growth, giving local residents options other than to leave rural areas in search of accessible employment.

10. Increasing public transport will also ensure more visitors can get to remote businesses. Arguably, this gives local people a newfound agency to establish novel businesses that interact sustainably with the local environment – think orienteering, water-sports etc. Long term, these authentic businesses will encourage visitors to return, keeping rural tourism in England competitive in a global industry.

11. Inevitably this raises questions regarding the capacity of rural economies to support a growing work force. Based on my experience working in the hospitality industry and on those of connections I have in West Somerset, there are already perennial issues with obtaining reliable staff in outlying rural villages, especially in the busy summer season.

Using public transport to address the skills deficit:

12. Productivity issues saturate the entire tourist sector. Deloitte and Oxford Economics’ Report found that ‘productivity gains would have impacts on the tourism economy’s contribution to UK GDP’ as well as generating ‘better service levels across the sector’. It follows that specialist training facilities have an important role to play in securing the UK rural tourism industry a reputation for excellence.

13. Attaining such a reputation would likely bring more visitors in, allowing local people to utilise their skills in industry all year found and negating problems of seasonal
employment.

14. However, many rural areas offer hospitality apprenticeships already. Minehead, for example, already has two such training organisations: Foxes Academy and YMCA Somerset Coast Group. The Council’s Economic Plan also expresses a desire for a further Tourism Service Training Academy designed to increase service excellence. Whilst there is always scope for training to be improved, getting people to these facilities in rural areas can pose a challenge. Therefore, **increased public transport plays an important underlying role in promoting access to specialist training.**

15. The logistics and cost of travel was an important factor in my own choice of Sixth Form. **This may lead the committee to also consider recommending subsidised travel for those pursuing tourism training in rural areas.**

**Concluding statements:**

16. In sum, this submission recommends that the committee addresses limited public transport infrastructure in rural areas. **Increased mobility is essential to grow visitor populations and facilitate access to rural businesses.** Giving local populations the autonomy to access training will also facilitate authentic rural regeneration.

I am happy to provide the committee with a full list of references if this would be helpful.

*January 2017*