Supplementary written evidence from Suffolk County Council (RUT0306)

Q1) What priority do your authorities place on supporting local rural tourist businesses?

- Suffolk is largely a rural county with a range of nationally significant landscapes and destinations. Therefore, alongside agriculture, it is one of the largest employment sectors within the county. A recent report considering the value of tourism to the economy in the Dedham vale for example placed it at £250m in 2015 supporting 4,800 jobs.
- With two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other nationally significant landscapes, the natural environment is a key capital asset to our tourism businesses. We know that walking and access to the outdoors are the key drivers to tourist visits in the county. Therefore management of the landscape and how visitors interact within it is a key consideration as a local authority.
- The major tourism industry in the county is focussed on our AONBs but as a large rural county it is also dispersed across the whole rural area which creates particular challenges such as marketing, suitable accommodation and transport and infrastructure which alone as a local authority are not placed to address in isolation. Especially if the sector is to maximise the growth opportunities provided by the recent trend to staycation.
- We also recognise that for Suffolk our focus is more on the “visitor economy” and less on Rural tourism in the traditional sense. The majority of trips made to the county are short term (less than a day) but are valuable to supporting rural businesses which themselves do not recognise themselves as belonging to the tourism sector.

Q1 b) the reductions in local authority spend generally are impacting on spend on tourism. Have you had a chance to measure the impact of that so far?

- In Suffolk we haven’t experienced a trend in this way. There is an annual Volume and Value survey undertaken and the latest data comparing 2014 with 2015 shows a small increase in both visitors and value to the economy. See attached report identifying the current trends.

Q2) What assessment, if any, you have made about the impact of Brexit on tourism, particularly the level of funding that will be needed with tourist businesses to replace EU funded programmes like LEADER and the money from the Rural Development Programme for England.

- The current and previous RDP programmes are important to the rural economy and these programmes have over time proven to be a good model for enabling small rural businesses to grow and develop. Therefore any successor programmes will have to learn the lessons of these and build on their success.
- One opportunity from Brexit is to address the way that RDP funds are distributed in cycles. You often get long lead in times for developing programmes which leaves gaps in opportunities for businesses over 2 to 3 years, plus periods when the programmes are getting started and not spending the money. Domestic programmes have the opportunity to bring funds to the fore sooner and offer a flat lined funding
programme structure. This would benefit businesses and other stakeholders by having more confidence in the funds being available.

- Brexit also offers an opportunity to develop and devolve these programmes down to local areas further. LEADER is a good example of the bottom approach to economic development, where communities develop local needs led strategies for investment. Equally the current working arrangements with the RPA and LEPS on the development of forthcoming calls under the EAFRD programme which have taken on a local flavour in the type of projects which could be supported, better reflecting the local need.

- Whatever the successor programmes look like, an opportunity to explore devolution would we believe be encouraged by local businesses and communities. The greater flexibility of funding that this approach offers and the ability to use the funding differently will we believe lead to better outcomes for central government.

- Devolution should not only be considered for the programmes which fall under the Growth programme and Pillar 2 of the CAP. There are opportunities under pillar 1 also to look at this approach. The importance of managing the countryside and landscapes/Habitats and the financial support that landowners get to manage the landscape in certain ways is really important to the tourism offer. It is the natural capital which supports our tourism offer, and so any fundamental change that could potentially come about from Brexit would have to consider its knock effect long term to sectors like tourism.

- As mentioned one of the benefits of the funding coming from with the EU is that when they are running over a 7-year cycle there is more certainty to businesses and communities that programmes are going to be around for a while and can therefore take an appropriate amount of time to develop a robust project and not be rushed to get application in because a funding programme is only open for a short period. Many public sector funds are often announced and then have short deadlines for application meaning people can either miss out or may rush project development to get funding and then have issues occur due to a lack of proper project development. In fact, one of the benefits of the LEADER programme in our experience is that during the application process applicants get advice either from the Accountable Body team or through decision making from the Local Action Group which highlights where projects may benefit from more development or support from business advisors in order to be in a position to be funded. As we are primarily dealing with Micro, Small and Medium size businesses where time and capacity for business growth/development can be an issue this sort of programme can be very beneficial in ensuring that businesses with good ideas for growth are in a position to not only gain the required funding but be in a position to make it a success.

- In the two LEADER areas managed by Suffolk County Council, we are seeing an extremely high interest in tourism projects, primarily tourism accommodation. LEADER covers 6 priority areas, with Rural Tourism being one. In total we have received 36 applications to date with 17 of these being for tourism related projects, so nearly half our applications are focused on the Rural Tourism priority highlighting the demand and desire locally to develop our tourist economy. In most cases the projects are applying to LEADER because they are finding it hard to raise the finance
needed to take their project forward. Tourism accommodation as you would expect can be high cost. When focussing on new or developing tourism area a lack of accommodation is one barrier to increasing the dwell time and spend of visitors. Therefore there is a definite need to facilitate more tourist accommodation in order to grow our tourist economy, in particular given the big difference between the spend of a day visitor and an overnight visitor. In many cases the tourist accommodation projects we are seeing are on farms with the farm looking to diversify into tourism in order to be more financially sustainable in the face of low crop prices or other challenges facing the agricultural sector. Investment into tourism in the rural economy is therefore not just about providing tourist services but can actually have a knock on effect to helping farms stay sustainable. This is important given that farmers are often the people who are looking after the very land that makes up the landscapes that are one of the reasons for tourists visiting.

Q3) Marketing is very important to your industry, so how do you rate VisitBritain and Visit England’s performance in marketing rural tourism, both here in the UK and abroad? & On destination management organisations, some 200 English destination management organisations market local and regional areas and there have been some criticisms of the DMOs. In your view, how effectively can destination management organisations market rural areas in competition with domestic and international organisation with much greater resources? And any thoughts about how to dilute those criticisms and improve their role? Would there be a level of protectionism involved in promotion and marketing?

- We see the development of DMO’s as the way forward for the future marketing of tourism, as businesses are the primary beneficiaries of tourism after all and often best placed to market their product.
- However there are unanswered questions regarding both the sustainability of and the complete role of a DMO especially when it comes to the “management of the product” also.
- There will always be a need to invest in ‘place’. Beautiful places don’t just happen, and tourism product management includes all sorts of funding from all sorts of places (landscape, nature reserves, PRoW, farming are a few examples). This is greater than DMOs have a remit for.
- In terms of sustainability the make-up of DMOs is very different and many are not financially sustainable without the support of the public sector. Their success depends on the number of tourism related businesses in an area. So in deep rural areas where it lacks the critical mass of core tourism businesses (those that see themselves as part of the tourism product), it is likely that not enough businesses are able to support a DMO, and therefore the public sector support still vital role in the management of the product.
- Suffolk County Council along with Districts Councils / Boroughs have collaborated across the County on issues like the Visit Suffolk campaign see link http://www.visitsuffolk.com/ Help is also provided to support the various DMO’s operating in Suffolk. But Local Authority resources are stretched to maintain support in this area. In an ideal world such initiatives would be self-funded by the industry
but in rural Suffolk where many businesses are small this is not realistic. So there remains a need for public funding to support marketing of rural tourism areas.

- One new model being developed in Suffolk are Local Tourism Action Groups (LTAG’s) which works in much smaller areas when a DMO doesn’t give you the critical mass needed or where the tourism offer is currently much smaller when compared to more established destinations. This satellite model is being developed across a number of small rural market towns and areas where local businesses and stakeholders can develop the tourism offer locally. These LTAGs would then feed into other more established DMOs for wider marketing and sharing of central services.

- In relation to funding opportunities LEADER as a funding stream supports tourism promotion but there are rules within the programme around eligible costs which prohibit invest linked to marketing of a place. One local frustration of LAG members is surely a programme that is supporting promotion of tourism should be able to cover the costs of all types of promotion. This is an example where the programme rules stifle the local needs on the ground.

Q 4) Signage - thoughts specifically on what you think either Highways England or other relevant bodies can do to improve signage to rural tourist destinations.

- Like many local authorities the general principle is to de-clutter the countryside, which is a positive move, and often welcomed by communities. However in some cases we welcome more signage in order to manage and develop tourism opportunities better, especially in areas such as honey pot sites and transport bottle necks. This can lead to conflicts between highways authorities and the needs of communities and businesses in this regard.

- There is often differing interpretation of DfT guidance in regards to signage related to tourism opportunities. This can often lead to conflicting approach in different areas of the county, where in some areas such as our Heritage Coast AONB boundary signage has been very difficult to deliver. Officers often find guidance on this is contradictory. The DCMS Tourism strategy refers to DMOs creating geographical identity, and the AONB national strategy is all about promotion and visibility of the area. However the DfT guidance is to de-clutter the Highways. So when trying to manage visitors to an area using signage the Suffolk Coast continually finds areas of the county where they are unable to deliver successful signage schemes.

- In contrast within the Brecks (shared area of South West Norfolk and North West Suffolk) a LEADER funded project was developed which created entry signs showing visitors when they had arrived within the area of the Brecks designation (the project also funded train wrapping for the train running on the Ipswich to Cambridge line). The entry signage helped to give the area a strong identity and sense of place for local communities and has been warmly welcomed. Equally the Waveney Valley has developed a similar approach regarding signage which has linked logos to a whole area branding. Each village and town has used the logo to show visitors that they are in the area, and this has led to local food and drink producers to follow suite and use the brand and logo to promote their products. The opportunity to join up signage and local marketing and branding is a good way to increase a destinations sense of place which is often central to tourism development.
Q5) Can I ask what your authorities are doing to help local businesses attract visitors to rural areas outside of the peak summer months?

- The strategy within the Suffolk Coast is to focus on shoulder season activity, outside of the peak summer and half term holidays. There are some positive examples such as the Aldeburgh Food and Drink Festival which runs during September, and attracts thousands of visitors over a long weekend.
- We have also seen a growing demand for extreme sport/endurance activity events. The timing of these events is crucial as they can attract a large number of visitors to an area from a wide catchment. Therefore, it is important to run these at times of the year with less tourists to minimise the impact and to extend the season. Equally it is important to consider the sensitivities of the fragile landscape and ensure the damage to the environment can be minimised.
- The DMO for the Suffolk Coast has developed a 10 year business plan as a result of an EU funded project called BALANCE (see below for more details). This also talks of developing the shoulder season for tourism. Part of the strategy is to look at different client bases, the offer of short weekends and day trips and the offer of “experiences”.

Q5 b) I would just like to get an assessment from you of how important you think the coastal path has been in terms of boosting visits to Cornwall etc & there are also more creative ways perhaps of getting visitors out of season, such as food heritage and garden tourism, which in Cornwall has really taken off. I just wonder how much potential you think there is there to vary the offer so that we get an all-year-round season.

- As mentioned previously the interaction with the natural environment and the walking cycling offer in the county are central to our tourism offer. The BALANCE project proved that tourism businesses understand and value the importance of the walking network in the area. One positive outcome from the project was a local business investing into the development of a local foot path as they understood how important it was to their business offer.
- Joining up of the coastal path in Suffolk is currently being developed in partnership with Natural England. There are obvious issues where there are private ferry operators linking up the route who find it hard to make the business sustainable. However, the completion of the route will undoubtable have a positive impact on tourism in the county. This will offer new and innovative marketing opportunities and businesses in the Suffolk coast are already aware of the importance that the a managed landscape is to their business success. This development will increase the year round offer in this area, however this will never be equitable but would be a boost to the number of visitors out of peak season.

Q6) We got some great lessons from Cornwall about examples of diversifying farm businesses into agri-tourism and such like. It would be great to hear from any examples that you can share with the Committee that we can hopefully expand on, and, secondly, whether
you have any thoughts on what Government should be doing as they look to design new support policies for rural areas after Brexit to support diversification of farm businesses into tourism.

- Supporting farmers to diversify into tourism and grow their businesses is a key part of developing rural tourism; planning policy and regulations need to enable ease of conversion of farm buildings for tourism and other appropriate economic activities in rural areas, recognising that many CEDOS member authorities already have positive planning policies to support rural diversification and increasingly recognise the significant impact the environment can have on the economy;

- As mentioned previously our experience with delivery of the LEADER programme shows us that farms are looking to the tourism sector to diversify their income streams. This isn’t driven by fears relating to Brexit, but has been a trend for some time and in part lead to it being included within the Local Development Strategies for our areas (developed during 2015)

- Currently within our LEADER are we have 12 applications in for tourism accommodation and they are all on farms. We also have a number of other projects that are around farm diversification, vineyard visitor centre, farm shop etc which are all looking to capitalise on the visitor economy as part of the project. It is also worth noting that we have supported a couple of farms for equipment under the Improving Farm productivity priority. The thing that all these projects have in common is that they are being driven by the need for farms to improve their financial sustainability. Therefore, it would seem that the small sums of funding that can be provided by LEADER have good potential to help farmers diversify or improve productivity in order to survive.

- In terms of business support there is a need for all Growth Hubs to be resourced to have specialist business advisers with a expertise in the sector. The sector is not like other business sectors and requires experts who are hospitality and accommodation orientated, able to recommend measures to improve standards of customer care and productivity. This is reflected in some of the criticisms within applications to the LEADER programme, where a farm may have the ability to deliver the capital element of the project, but the diversification into a new sector requires new skills and business support which may have to come from outside of their traditional support structures.

**Q8** what more can central and local government do to improve local bus routes and rail transport for rural visitors? This has been raised time and time again. Even within Northern Ireland we have an issue with that. In relation to local government, what more can they do to help that? & what sort of infrastructure is there for rail routes and the railways? Are they good? Are they bad?
- There are many challenges to local buses services and they are changing the way these are operating in rural areas to a more demand responsive service. However we have also had some successful seasonal schemes which link train stations with the countryside within our AONBs using minibuses. These however are not sustainable at the scale they operate and always rely on subsidy from our AONBs.

- In order for this to be effective the infrastructure needs to be in place to ensure rural areas are linked to their hinterland. So for example seasonal holidaymaker demands are rarely able to be factored in to bus services routes and timetables because of the cost constraints. This requires innovative public transport solutions to cater for the needs of visitors. Suffolk has a number of rural hotspots on its coast where the demands of visitors can overwhelm resident communities during the summer months. Measures are required to help disperse this pressure further inland to rural towns and villages that can accommodate them and indeed would welcome the extra visitor spend the influx represents.

Q9) we talked about national parks and walks and things like that, and you were able to emphasise just how important they were to the local economy. Some of the evidence that this Committee has received already does suggest that good walking access is vital to rural tourism and income generation.

- See previous comments and attached details which highlight the importance of walking and access to the countryside here in Suffolk. Central to this are our AONBs and the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads.

Q9b) What about that criticism directly that local authorities are not maintaining these trails and paths? And Would you have any specific suggestions in relation to how some of those funding constraints could be addressed or should be addressed? & Many walkers do not like linear routes, because they have to find a way back; you either catch a bus or you do five or six days’ walking and stay somewhere every night. More generally, the circular routes are favoured, which on the coastal path is quite difficult, very often; you cannot always do continual loops. I just wonder whether you think that the broader walking community would be receptive to this quite radical concept of reconfiguring public rights of way in certain parts of the country, to reflect their modern usage rather than their historical development.

- As mentioned via the BALANCE project we have enable to unlock Private investment into a right of Way when they understand how important this is to their business. However the scale of the network and maintenance required would never match the amount able to be unlocked by private investment. Given that we recognise the importance of walking to our visitor economy we are still maintaining our routes as best as possible within current constraints.

- Equally some businesses are more interested in supporting the network in other ways. Adnams have supported a number of leaflets promoting circular walks around the county.

- We also promote walking through our annual walking festival which looks to promote new routes and encourage
Q12) balancing the economic, social and environmental issues. Britain is ranked in third place for the strength of its whole national brand, but only 15th for its natural beauty and the Government note that more could be done to improve awareness by overseas visitors. In that respect, and if I could start with Julian, how are you working with businesses to minimise the impact of visitor activities on the environment and character of rural places?

- Here in Suffolk we have been developing a stronger narrative regarding the importance of our natural capital and its link to developing our tourism offer. Rural tourism is based on natural capital and tourism businesses must recognise that the environment is as much a part of their business capital as their hotels and cottages. The BALANCE project referenced earlier has proved that there is opportunity to build on the links between businesses and the natural environment and the need to effectively balance the protection of the natural environment with the demands for access to the countryside.

- For Businesses it’s a key part of their product and they should invest in it. We have visitor payback in Suffolk Coast, which demonstrates that this can work as a model for businesses investing in their area, however there is still a broad assumption that the landscape comes for free.

Additional Information

A) BALANCE Project information


The Balance project – was a cross boarder project with 5 EU partners that looked at ways to balance the needs of the natural environment with the demands for access to the countryside. In Suffolk we worked closely with local businesses looking at how they can get involved in developing a promoting sustainable tourism and this led to the DMO developing its Tourism strategy which is in place today.

In Summary the project which concluded in December 2013 achieved:

- A Visitor & Tourism Strategy - raising awareness of landscapes and leading to informed choices regarding future visitor areas.
- Improvements to the Suffolk Coast Path, Sandlings Walk and Stour & Orwell Walk
- 55 information boards and Explorer guides to help visitors enjoy the AONB
- Development of the ‘I’m a Good Dog!’ campaign for responsible dog ownership.
- Promoting car-free itineraries for visitors.
- Gathering information and data on the number of visitors to the AONB and their profile.
- A detailed socio-economic study of the Suffolk Coast Path, Sandlings Walk and Stour & Orwell Walk.

Project a good example where private sector has bought into the importance of the natural environment to support their business.

B) Extract from the Suffolk Nature Strategy referencing the importance of the Natural capital and its link to Tourism business


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TOURISM

Green Suffolk’s stunning and distinctive natural environment and its proximity to London and the Midlands, the county has long been a popular tourist destination and tourism remains a major employer in the county contributing over £1.5 billion annually to the local economy. The natural environment of Suffolk plays a vital role in attracting visitors with an offer ranging from nationally designated landscapes to locally sourced food and drink.

Our natural environment is a capital asset to Suffolk’s tourism businesses so the development of tourism needs to be appropriate and sensitive to placing. We support the increasing popularity of eco-friendly holidays, as seen by the recent Green Traveller guides to Suffolk Coast & Heaths and Dedham Vale AONBs. We also support emerging destination management organisations (DMOs), such as on the Suffolk Coast, which have the potential to minimise the impacts of tourism as well as inform visitors about the importance of the natural environment.

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