1. Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence to the Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. The Historic Houses Association (HHA) represents more than 1,600 historic houses, castles and gardens in independent ownership across the UK. Member houses range from world-renowned tourist attractions such as Blenheim Palace, Highclere Castle, Castle Howard, Knebworth House and Burghley House, to more intimate houses such as Traquair in Scotland, Treowen in Wales and Belle Isle in Northern Ireland. Approximately 60 per cent are open to the public, either as day visitors or by appointment.

2. HHA Member houses attract over 24 million visits each year, contributing over £1 billion to the economy and generating the equivalent of 41,000 full time jobs, more often than not in rural areas. As tourist attractions, events venues and business hubs, HHA Members are vital linchpins for rural communities not only through secondary spend from visitors but also through procurement; annually HHA Members spend over £247 million a year with over 23,000 businesses across the UK.

Question 1: Since the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), and subsequent winding up of the Defra Rural Communities Policy Unit, how – if at all - are the CRC's original functions of advocate, adviser and watchdog being fulfilled?

3. There is a tendency to pigeon-hole rural issues as primarily related to farming and land management, but – while these are very important areas – many landowners are also diversifying their businesses through rural tourism and events, which are becoming increasingly important drivers of enterprise and employment in rural areas. The majority of HHA Member houses are situated in rural communities, creating employment opportunities both directly and indirectly as mentioned above. While there are organisations advocating for rural policy, advising those who live in rural areas, and acting as a ‘watchdog’ for the impact that legislation might have on rural regions, many of these seem to be outside of government. Given the increasing role of trade associations and other non-government bodies in fulfilling the former functions of the CRC, it is vitally important that DEFRA works collaboratively and inclusively with the full range of these organisations to ensure effective policy-making.

Question 2: Are sufficient measures being taken to ensure that policies are rural-proofed at national and local levels? Who is taking the lead on policy for rural areas – and who should be taking the lead on such matters?

4. At a national level, the HHA would like to see Defra develop the important work that it does to champion rural communities, but working in partnership with other departments – such as DCMS - will be essential. There is work being done by the Government to develop individual policies that will be beneficial to rural communities, for example the continued work on the roll out of rural broadband. However, the Government should go further by ensuring that rural needs are considered across all legislation rather than solely rural-targeted schemes.
5. For example, while the HHA welcomes the work that is being done to develop tourism in the UK, both domestic and inbound, the key issues that impact rural tourism are not being addressed as part of the whole. There is still a lack of basic travel infrastructure and information-sharing between public transport and tourist destinations (the ‘final mile’ issue) that deters both domestic and inbound tourists from visiting rural attractions such as historic houses. As a result, many rural attractions do not feel the benefit of tourism schemes that might increase visitor numbers to the region but do nothing to improve physical connectivity. If rural needs were more central to the formation of tourism policy – i.e. tourism policy as a whole was ‘rural-proofed’ - there might be more central government investment in transport schemes that would increase visitor numbers and visitor spend in rural areas, invigorating many rural communities.

6. At a local level, many HHA Member houses find it difficult to engage with their LEP or DMO as: a/ many are located in the hinterland of towns and cities, not the urban centres where LEPs and DMOs tend to focus their engagement; and b/ there is not enough understanding about what less frequently open historic houses can contribute to the local tourism offer, as well as a reluctance to engage with popular attractions that are not open 300+ days a year. The HHA would welcome support from national government, perhaps Defra and DCMS working in tandem, to encourage LEPs and DMOs to engage fully with the full diversity of tourism attractions in their area. Such deep engagement would result in more vibrant business partnerships and more enticing rural tourism offers across the UK.

**Question 3: What role should Defra – or other Government departments – play in co-ordinating policy for rural areas? How effectively are the interests – including social and economic interests - of rural communities being represented within the current structures of Government, and how could representation and co-ordination be improved?**

7. The effective coordination of government departments to work together for the rural community remains a concern for many HHA Members, especially if they are rural tourism attractions open to the public. As noted above, many HHA Member houses are economic, social and cultural lynchpins in their local communities, providing jobs, supporting local suppliers and bringing in visitors who will spend money in local towns and villages. The HHA is concerned that there is not enough strategic communication between government departments, especially Defra and DCMS, to allow for really innovative tourism policy to be developed for the whole country – rural communities included.

8. An example of this is the delay in the publication of the long anticipated ‘TD 52/04 – Traffic Signs to Tourist Attractions and Facilities in England – Tourist Signing: Trunk Roads’. This important guidance was initially expected by the end of 2016, but still has yet to be published. So-called brown signs remain a significant factor in rural tourism, and there is still confusion around which attractions qualify for these signs that have such wide public recognition. With the increase in domestic overnight stays, up 14%
according to Visit Britain statistics, ‘brown signs’ are likely to become increasingly important. The HHA would urge Defra to work with other government departments, most notably the Department for Transport and DCMS, so that all stakeholders receive a clear briefing from the Brown Signs Working Group (DfT, Highways England, DCMS and Visit England) explaining the key changes to the guidance and how it will better support genuine tourism attractions, in line with Government’s tourism strategy.

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