



# Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Committee Office, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA  
Tel 020 7219 3263/6194 Email [efracom@parliament.uk](mailto:efracom@parliament.uk) Website [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)

## From the Chairman of the Committee

Lord Gardiner of Kimble  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State  
Defra  
Nobel House  
17 Smith Square  
London SW1P 3JR

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### **Rural tourism in England**

As you know, my Committee has been conducting an inquiry into rural tourism in England. We launched the inquiry last year to seek evidence on how policies can encourage more people, both from the UK and abroad, to visit more of England's rural places, for longer and at all times of the year. As part of this work, we have been examining how farmers and rural residents can be better helped to diversify into tourism and grow their businesses, as well as to ensure that visitors' experiences are balanced with the need to preserve the environment and the character of local communities.

With the calling of an early General Election we have been unable to conclude our evidence gathering. This letter is to place on record ahead of the dissolution of Parliament some of the key issues raised with us.

#### **1. Support for tourist businesses**

Tourism is one of the UK's largest industries and visitor spend makes up more than 7% of GDP. The sector is thriving but rural businesses expressed concerns that the benefits are accruing disproportionately to the big cities, particularly London. Witnesses called for more to be done to spread visitors and their spend across regions and out into rural coast and country areas.

Witnesses have expressed dissatisfaction with current organisational arrangements under VisitBritain/VisitEngland and Destination Management Organisations for promoting rural destinations and areas. Evidence suggested that there is a poor focus on encouraging visitors to come to areas beyond the well-known places and that recent changes to marketing organisations' remits have not been helpful. The ways in which English rural tourism is supported at national and local level is a key area for future review.

## **2. Access to rural areas**

Some 20 million overnight trips and 335 million day trips are taken each year to rural destinations. The vast majority of visitors rely on cars to get them to their destinations and to travel around the local area. Witnesses expressed frustration over the impact of poor bus and rail services on rural businesses. We received some good local examples of initiatives to provide the types of services visitors require, such as Henge Hopper in Wiltshire and Breeze up to the Downs bus service in Brighton. Further consideration is warranted of such approaches to provide alternatives to private car access to rural destinations.

We also heard that some places are not well sign-posted from major roads so that those passing through are unaware of areas they might wish to visit. Brown signs provide directions to many places but the rules governing their use are designed to help traffic flows, not to assist tourists. A key area for review is how brown signs might be used to promote more places of interest to visitors.

## **3. Broadband and mobile connectivity**

The top barrier to rural tourism business growth identified by a considerable number of witnesses was the lack of adequate broadband connections and mobile phone coverage. We have considered broadband issues a number of times in other inquiries and have expressed disappointment that the current BDUK schemes delivered by BT Openreach have failed to meet the needs of many rural businesses. Tourism businesses told us that they require reliable, fast connections not only to market their offer but also to provide a service for visitors who are increasingly unwilling to stay in places without a good broadband, or indeed mobile phone, service. The proposed Universal Service Obligation is an urgent issue for the future Government to address to ensure that rural communities which have been left behind, are given the effective connections they need.

## **4. Funding and fiscal policies**

Rural tourism businesses highlighted a number of fiscal issues of concern, including the disparity between VAT rates in the UK and in other EU Member States. This particularly impacts businesses in Northern Ireland since the applicable VAT rate in the Republic of Ireland is only 9%. A re-examination of VAT levels for tourism activities is a key issue for Government work on the fiscal regime post-Brexit. We also note that witnesses were concerned about the impact, particularly on small and micro-businesses, of changes in business rates.

## **5. Skills**

Witnesses told us that the tourism industry in rural areas faces stiff competition for labour from other sectors. We received a considerable amount of evidence expressing concern about potential shortfalls of staff in future. Seasonal tourism work, sometimes in remote locations and potentially with long hours, can be less attractive than other sectors to UK workers. An issue for future consideration is how initiatives to make tourism more attractive as a career can be stepped up. Additionally, witnesses raised concerns about potential impacts of Brexit on supply of labour from EU Member States as these workers currently supply a significant proportion of the tourism workforce. We also considered this topic in our inquiry into labour constraints in the agricultural sector and note that it is a key issue for future policy scrutiny.

Our successor Committee may wish to take these issues forward in its work programme in the next Parliament.

I am publishing this letter today and a copy is being sent to Tracey Crouch, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Sport, Tourism and Heritage.

Kindest Regards  
Neil Parish

**Neil Parish MP**  
**Chairman of the Committee**