

**EFRA Committee
Rural Tourism in England Inquiry**

Written evidence submitted by Cotswolds Conservation Board

Executive Summary:

Destination Management Organisations and Plans should be visitor destination orientated rather than public sector administrative area orientated.

Good quality, safe and enjoyable access requires management and investment.

It is clear from the delivery of strategic investment funding programmes such as LEADER that future funding and fiscal policies should be directed towards pro-active local management bodies that offer a genuine tourism destination.

Planning policy should be reinforced to confirm that the existing “great weight” test (NPPF Paragraph 115) lies in favour of “conserving landscape and scenic beauty” in AONBs.

More should be done to make exploring rural areas by public transport fun days out, an adventure to relish and have confidence in rather than fear.

Affordable housing for low incomes associated with tourism sector jobs should be given greater consideration.

The popularity of high quality rural destinations for retirement, an ageing population and the associated concessionary fares scheme means that a growing number of rural bus services become uneconomic and close.

Protected Landscape (AONB and National Park) Management Plans provide an ideal overarching set of objectives and policies within which to secure the right balance between developing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character.

Defra should advance an 8 Point Plan for all the Protected Landscapes, representing our AONBs, Heritage Coasts and National Parks across Government.

Defra should take action to secure the sustainable longer term funding arrangements for National Trails ahead of 2017/18.

Introduction

1. This submission is made by the Cotswolds Conservation Board, which was established by Parliament in 2004. The Board has two statutory purposes:

to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); and

to increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB.

2. It also has a duty to seek to foster the social and economic wellbeing of the AONBs local communities.

3. Board members are appointed by the local authorities, town and parish councils and Defra.
4. The Cotswolds AONB was designated in 1966, so celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2016. It is a nationally and internationally renowned destination, attracting an estimated 23 million day visits a year.
5. The Board delivers a series of products linked to its second purpose which also relate to the delivery and promotion of sustainable tourism across the whole AONB.
6. In summary the Board publishes the Cotswold Lion magazine twice a year (an insight to the AONB), publishes the Explore the Cotswolds by Public Transport guide, co-ordinates the Cotswolds Discoverer rail and bus integrated ticket, operates the Cotswolds Discovery Centre and associated café, runs a Visitor Giving scheme in partnership with the tourism industry, offers a wide range of downloadable walks and ride guides, manages the Cotswold Way National Trail, offers a programme of guided walks led by voluntary wardens, operates an expanding rural skills programme of courses and achieved the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas for the Cotswolds.
7. It has also been a keen and active advocate for a Cotswolds wide Destination Management approach, spanning the whole Cotswolds AONB and adjoining destinations in order to offer the visitor the best possible guidance, information and interpretation.

Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should the Government do to support this work?

8. Marketing does not always see the destination from the user perspective. The original Destination Management Organisation (DMO) concept was for DMOs to be destination focussed. A large number of DMOs quickly became county or administrative area specific rather than destination orientated. As a result, large internationally recognised rural landscapes such as the Cotswolds are subdivided and marketed by a series of administrative based DMOs or local authority teams.
9. Less resource with greater effect could be spent if the user was taken into greater account. The user doesn't worry about which administrative unit they are visiting. What matters to them is a comprehensive approach to a single destination in terms of information and interpretation.
10. There have been instances where the M in DMO or Destination Management Plan (DMP) has appeared to stand for Marketing rather than Management. Any destination, be it urban, rural or protected landscape needs both. Marketing without regard to Management is not an answer.
11. Given the identity of the country's iconic rural landscapes there is a significant opportunity to develop a strong link between the management of the country's AONBs, National Parks and Heritage Coasts with the need for strategic destination management.
12. Such iconic landscapes underpin the local tourism industry. They provide the views, villages and experiences that attract the visitor. Such landscapes can provide strong marketing opportunities, but marketing needs to recognise the management needs of the area or it is in danger of killing the goose that lays the golden egg.
13. These links are recognised in the development of the Conservation Board's Visitor Giving scheme, where the tourism provider and visitor both recognise that the landscape

upon which their visit or business is based needs day to day management. An additional voluntary contribution of £1, £5 or £10 on a bill at the end of a meal or an overnight stay is invested in a walking route, new woodland creation or an interpretation panel, which in turn delivers an improved visitor experience.

14. A national approach to Visitor Giving with local identity, application and delivery could be developed.

Access: What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?

15. National Trails were established to explore Britain's finest landscapes. The Cotswolds AONB is home to the Cotswold Way National Trail and the start of the Thames Path National Trail. Trails have been designated by Natural England, an agency of Defra to explore Britain's finest landscapes. They offer an affordable means of exploring our countryside and heritage. They provide a tourism income for rural areas, with walkers and riders requiring overnight accommodation, food and services. They have also stimulated new businesses such as guided tours or baggage transfers between accommodations.
16. Natural England was unable to offer grant support for National Trails at the start of 2016/17 and then signalled a 50% in year cut in early June. Defra's Secretary of State / Minister intervened and grants were reinstated for this year, but there is no certainty over grant settlements for 2017 /18 onwards. Urgent action to resolve this issue is required.
17. Across the Cotswolds are a wide range of other named or themed walking and riding routes. The area could easily be described as the Walking and Exploring Capital of the England. However once established the routes require ongoing investment to keep them open and waymarked, giving people the confidence to explore and enjoy the countryside.
18. Good quality, safe and enjoyable access requires management and investment. Access is a cost effective form of outdoor recreation, for all sections of society. It also keeps people of all ages active and healthy, leading to significant health and wellbeing benefits, with associated savings for the NHS. Access also stimulates the local economy eg Walkers are Welcome initiatives have helped breath life back in to some market towns.
19. Local Authority and Highway Authority cutbacks as a result of austerity measures has seen the rights of way network suffer from less day to day maintenance and investment, resulting in routes becoming overgrown and less attractive to use.

Funding and fiscal policies: How can public funding be best targeted to get new rural tourist businesses off the ground and keep them going? Are changes needed to tax levels and business rates?

20. The Board has an established track record of working with various local stakeholders and rural businesses in the tourism sector, and has identified, scoped, and administered various increased rural tourism capital investment projects, including acting as the accountable body for the £1.9m Cotswolds LEADER Programme. The programme is targeted to deliver investment in small business creation and growth, job creation, and increased footfall and spend in rural tourism across multiple administrative boundaries.
21. It is clear from the delivery of strategic investment funding programmes such as LEADER that future funding and fiscal policies must be geared towards pro-active local management bodies that offer a genuine tourism destination such as the Cotswolds Area

of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which reflects the distinct natural geography, and landscape character of an area's visitor economy, rather than traditional public sector or electoral boundaries. If this central principle is compromised then destinations such as 'The Cotswolds' will not be marketed coherently or effectively, and customers will be treated inconsistently or unpredictably as they move across invisible public-sector boundaries. These types of decision are best taken locally by those who know the precise operational and investment needs and aspirations of individual tourist businesses within a holistic destination area.

22. This devolved locally led approach to funding and fiscal policy making including stakeholder engagement, place shaping, investment priorities, business support, and programme delivery is critically important to communities, businesses and visitors, as supported by the national tourism policy, (England: A Strategic Framework for Tourism 2010-20). This highlights the Cotswolds as being one of England's 'world famous and exceptional destinations' which attracts significant overseas visitors.

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?

23. This country's nationally protected landscapes are a significant resource at attracting both local and international tourism. Tourism can be a vital way of ensuring that high quality landscapes are maintained in good and improving condition through support to the local economy.
24. However, in relation to new development generally, though specifically new house building, planning policy should be reinforced to confirm that the existing "great weight" test (NPPF Paragraph 115) lies in favour of "conserving landscape and scenic beauty" in AONBs. The need for growth and new housing should not automatically "trump" the legal protection (CRoW Act 2000) given to nationally protected landscapes. New housing provision should be strictly controlled, prioritise meeting local affordable need and be of the highest quality in AONBs.
25. The erosion of the recognised special qualities of all AONBs through inappropriate levels of development will in turn result in the long term erosion of tourism, as a decline in landscape character and quality will result in a decline in visitor numbers.

Infrastructure and skills: What measures are needed to ensure transport, housing and other infrastructure meets visitor needs? How can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?

26. The public often have a poor perception of public transport in terms of reliability and running to time. The reverse is often the case, with rural bus drivers often delaying start times to take account of known delays on a connecting rail service or local traffic situations. More should be done to make exploring rural areas by public transport fun days out, an adventure to relish and have confidence in rather than fear.
27. The Board has a successful track record of promoting the exploration of the area by public transport; taking the various local authority based parts of the jigsaw to provide a guide for the destination as a whole i.e. Explore the Cotswolds by Public Transport, including; suggested bus and walking / visitor attraction itineraries.
28. It has more recently brought the public and private sectors together to successfully develop the Cotswolds Discoverer ticket, an integrated bus and rail ticket for the area. The Board also seeks to invest in and promote new and establishing minibus guided tour

companies and electric bike tour companies who are offering a growing range of options for exploring the area.

29. Unfortunately local authority austerity measures have resulted in the reduction of support for public transport services, resulting in almost no Sunday or Bank Holiday bus services operating in the Cotswolds. At the same time, the popularity of high quality rural destinations for retirement, an ageing population and the associated concessionary fares scheme means that a growing number of rural bus services become uneconomic and close.
30. Public transport support has in the past been divided into local resident or visitor services. This has not been a helpful approach. All too often there is little or no separation between local resident or visitor needs for access to public transport.
31. With the growing popularity of cycling the Board has been keen to encourage the transportation of bikes on buses, but with limited success. The Board is keen to see bike racks attached to the back or front of buses, as seen and experienced in Europe and further afield. The option of having an expensive bike sliding around unsecure in the cavernous boot of a coach is not an acceptable option when professional bike racks are available.
32. High quality landscape destinations such as the Cotswolds are attractive to both visitors and residents, often resulting in significant numbers daily or weekly outward / inward migration, which is not sustainable. Affordable housing for low incomes associated with tourism sector jobs should be given greater consideration. Community Land Trusts or Local Development Orders may offer a solution.
33. Similarly, more attention should be given to providing a range of visitor accommodation options, including sufficient low cost accommodation options.

Local environment and character: How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

34. The Conservation Board is responsible for the drafting and consultation processes and publication of the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan, a 5 year statutory plan outlining the objectives and policies for the area. The plan is agreed with Defra and its agencies and is endorsed by the 15 local authorities as well as a wide variety of public, private and voluntary sector organisations.
35. The plan is underpinned by a detailed landscape character assessment and an associated landscape strategy and guidelines.
36. The plan is structured around the conservation and enhancement of the landscape (the purpose of designating the AONB in 1966) and the greater understanding and enjoyment of the area. As such it is well placed to provide the objective and policy overview for the management of the area and the development of appropriate tourism policy and strategy.
37. The Management Plans also help to identify and celebrate what makes the area special and the policies that help support local produce and products. It provides an ideal overarching set of objectives and policies within which to secure the right balance between developing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character. It provides an ideal overarching set of objectives and policies under which to develop a Destination Management Plan.

Defra role: What more should Defra do to ensure government departments (including Departments for Communities & Local Government, Business, Innovation & Skills, Culture, Media & Sport and HM Treasury) support rural tourism?

38. Defra has to be an ambassador for all Protected Landscapes across Government. The Defra 8 Point Plan for National Parks published earlier this year highlighted the value of National Parks as world class destinations and their potential for increasing the number of overseas visitors. It completely missed the opportunity of highlighting the same potential for AONBs, a number of which are more readily recognised and appreciated by overseas visitors than Parks.
39. An 8 Point Plan for all the Protected Landscapes, which comprise 25% of England, and representing our AONBs, Heritage Coasts and National Parks across Government would be a much better and more effective approach.
40. Defra should take action to secure the sustainable longer term funding arrangements for National Trails ahead of 2017/18. The family of Trails, AONBs and National Parks all emerged from the 1949 National Parks & Access to the Countryside Act. The Trails were created to explore our finest landscapes, for which largely read our AONBs and National Parks. Since 1949 the three strands have to varying degrees operated in silos.
41. There is an immediate opportunity for Defra to make far more of the whole protected landscapes and trails family. The Board would suggest the following alternative funding arrangement that would potentially improve efficiency and effectiveness, to passport money to the front line and pass the money through the least number of hands.
42. The AONBs and Parks are funded through Defra and this system works extremely well. Given that direct funding of protected landscapes is already established, we suggest that there is scope for Defra to fund the trails direct. There is also scope for Defra to fund the trails via the Parks and AONBs, particularly given the high degrees of coincidence between Protected Landscapes and trails.
43. Defra's four year commitment and support for the Parks and AONBs from 2016/17 has been warmly welcomed and much appreciated. We are not suggesting that the Parks or AONBs subsidise the trails, but that consideration be given to merging the grant settlements and processes. It should be possible to identify a lead protected landscape per trail. At present the Park and AONB main budgets are supported by Defra with some Parks or AONBs receiving a separate grant for a trail from Natural England. If the above suggestion were adopted, the grants could be offered, accepted and accounted for in one rather than two processes.

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