

RURAL TOURISM ACTION PLAN

Vision

To maximise the potential of the rural tourism offer, which will bring substantial benefits to local economies and communities and contribute to 5% growth, year on year, in the England tourism market by 2020.

Objectives

1. To diversify and modernise rural tourism products to generate business opportunities suited to local environments and communities and to develop a year round visitor offer.
2. To increase consumer awareness, understanding and enjoyment of the products and experiences available in rural areas.
3. To encourage rural communities and economies to benefit from the value of rural tourism by taking ownership for the development, management, protection and conservation of rural assets and locations.

What is Rural Tourism?

This Action Plan defines rural as the geographic areas that sit outside the main urban areas of England (source: Defra). This accounts for over 80% of the land area and around 20% of the population of England.

The rural tourism offer is distinctive and diverse, demonstrated through the wide range of products and experiences on offer, examples include walking, adventure sports, horse-riding, fishing, boating, literary festivals, bird watching, conservation activities, business meetings and team building.

The rural assets and locations where these activities take place are equally diverse and include farms, waterways, rural coastline, rural towns, market towns and villages, pubs, historic houses and archaeological sites, gardens, lakes, woodlands, mountains and designated landscapes such as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and wildlife habitats.

The [appendix](#) sets out a fuller list of rural tourism products, experiences, assets and locations. It is not exhaustive and will vary greatly between rural areas.

Why take action on Rural Tourism?

Despite the size and attractions of rural England, the proportion of all overnight domestic trips is relatively low when compared with all overnight domestic trips in England. Of all overnight domestic trips, 19.3 million, or 19%, were made to the countryside in England in 2009. The value of countryside trips in England in 2009 was £3.2 billion, 18% of total domestic spend (source: UKTS). But holiday trips to the countryside are on an upward trend and this must be sustained to contribute to the Framework's ambition of 5% growth in the value of tourism year on year.

Tourism in rural areas creates employment and opportunities for business growth where other opportunities may be limited, as well as maintaining and protecting existing jobs, micro businesses and those self-employed in rural areas. In Yorkshire, for example, rural areas account for 39% of all jobs in the visitor economy in the region and 37% of the total visitor economy (source: Welcome to Yorkshire).

Tourism provides the ability to supplement the income streams of businesses operating or fixed in rural locations, a good example of this is farm diversification. This can help maintain the environmental and landscape qualities which are valued by visitors, communities and businesses alike.

Tourism supports the economic viability of communities. Local services and amenities, such as shops, pubs, restaurants, transport and postal services are all supported and sustained by visitors to rural areas.

Tourism has the ability to contribute to the conservation and enhancement of England's natural and built environment through the businesses and visitors that benefit and rely on these rural assets. This is not always a direct contribution but recognition by those investing in the environment that their conservation is important to the visitor economy.

Challenges and Opportunities

- The diversity of the rural tourism offer means that the challenges and opportunities will differ from area to area.
- To varying degrees, across different rural areas, tourism can drive, dominate or sustain the economy. However, it must be managed carefully to avoid over reliance of local economies on tourism and to avoid the associated negative impacts on the environment, economy and communities, for example the supply of affordable owned or rented housing, the level of wages, increased traffic congestion and, potentially, environmental degradation.
- Day visits to the countryside account for 16% of tourism day visits (136 million trips), accounting for £4billion in expenditure, 11% of the day visits in total (source: UKTS). There is significant growth potential for rural tourism if day visits can be converted to overnight stays.
- The same growth potential exists from international visits. Total inbound visits to England in 2009 were 25.4 million and a relatively low 17% involve a trip to the countryside (source: IPS).
- Compared to the total of all trips in England, trips in the countryside are more likely to be for a holiday than for business purposes (source: UKTS). The decline in business trips to rural areas is an area that will be addressed through this Action Plan. By exploring the reasons for the decline and taking action this trend could be reversed.
- Day visits to the countryside are significantly more seasonal than other destinations - 70% of countryside day visits take place in spring and summer, compared with 52% across all destinations, and 7% take place in the winter months, compared with 21% across all destinations (source: 2005 ELVS Survey, 2002 GBDVS). To ensure rural tourism growth, destinations must develop and market new products and experiences that appeal to visitors all year round and are less weather dependent.
- Rural tourism provides an escape for the urban population and a range of distinct leisure time activities. It provides recreation and tranquillity and the interweaving of nature with local

architecture, food, culture and community. This could be a potential message to develop and help target growth in business tourism in rural areas.

- Consumers are becoming more reliant on technology to access information. Rural products can be brought alive using new interpretation techniques to attract and meet the expectations of new and existing audiences. A good example is the National Trust's series of downloadable walks, an iPhone application and geo-caching which is being trialled at several sites. However, lack of provision of broadband connectivity in many rural areas may prevent these opportunities from being realised. The Government has recently announced investment in broadband in rural areas which is a positive step and the Country Land and Business Association are working with Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) to establish the level of demand for broadband and the viability of a community project.
- Rural attractions and businesses are usually relatively small. This means that careful promotion is required to prevent creating demand that rural areas cannot meet or that would lead to a scale of attraction that would detract from the quality of the experience for visitors. Communicating the rural tourism offer to consumers needs to be carefully managed across the country.
- The good range of local produce scores highly among those who visited the countryside in the England Brand tracker, when compared with other types of destination. Rural tourism is distinctive to its locality; the foods, products and landscapes have been shaped by generations, providing opportunities to create authentic appealing experiences for visitors that allow local communities to celebrate and take pride in their culture.
- Developing rural tourism products and experiences for visitors that are based on natural assets, for example wildlife, provides a potential business opportunity. But access for visitors is often restricted because asset managers haven't fully realised the benefits of tourism. If natural and wildlife asset managers are well informed about the markets for their products, understand the potential for raising revenue to support and protect their assets through tourism, and the measures that can be taken to minimise the impact of visitors, then this opportunity can be maximised.
- It is important for resident communities to be involved in the development of tourism in rural areas and understand the benefits it can bring. There needs to be a greater focus on support for destinations and communities which take a lead on tourism in their locality and that local community groups, volunteers and stakeholders can drive forward initiatives in rural areas.
- Planning constraints can be a major barrier to the expansion and diversification of the rural tourism product. Guidance, collection and dissemination of evidence and research to support the case for rural tourism development are crucial and rural tourism growth must be facilitated in the Government's National Planning Framework.
- Many problems that rural tourism businesses and related stakeholders face are shared with urban equivalents but solutions need to be tailored to take account of the different operating environment. This includes the dispersed nature of rural communities and businesses within them, access to services and support, visitor access issues and vulnerability to increasing prices in fuel, energy and food.
- Transport in rural areas continues to be a challenge for tourism and local communities. Trips to the countryside in England are more likely to be taken by car as rural areas have fewer alternatives; public transport provision is a major challenge and perceived as being expensive. Rising fuel prices place rural destinations at a disproportionate vulnerability due to more limited alternatives and, sometimes, distant location from urban populations. With

government policy aiming to reduce use of the car and the majority of new transport investment taking place in urban areas, local solutions to transport issues in rural destinations must be found to avoid longer term difficulties for the rural tourism economy.

- A completely car free rural area and low carbon initiatives will be difficult to implement. This means accepting that some car use is necessary for rural tourism but encouraging more initiatives that increase dwell times at destinations, reduce mileage and length of car journey, such as walks and itineraries that are integrated with public transport and visitor experiences. It is also important to encourage sustainable transport options when visitors arrive at their destination, for example, encouraging accommodation to link to cycle hire firms, cycle racks, and cycle friendly venues for visitors to bring their own bikes.
- The impacts of climate change on tourism cannot be ignored in the ten year period covered by the Strategic Framework. Changes to the climate are largely predicted to create milder, wetter winters and drier, warmer summers with increased incidences of extreme weather. It may also affect how the landscape is managed which may impact on its visual appeal or its ability to repair itself from the impact of visitors. The focus in the first years of the action plan should be on preparation and adaptation to these changing conditions.
- The vulnerability of rural tourism to current and expected increasing fuel, energy and food prices compromises the profitability and resilience of rural tourism. There is the potential opportunity for tourism operators in rural areas to reduce overheads and the resources they use by moving away from expensive and polluting sources of energy. This could be achieved through accessing the renewable energy initiatives, many local to rural areas, such as timber, wind, hydro and solar farms. In some locations these initiatives might be tourism attractions in their own right and help to disperse visitors away from 'honeypot' sites. However, the potential impact on the landscape and aesthetics of multiple or large scale developments could be a potential threat to the very assets visitors are coming to see. There are opportunities to work more closely with energy companies and explore whether they can tailor the services they supply to rural and lifestyle businesses.
- Changes to traditional funding streams for agriculture and land management, such as the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE), mean that rural asset managers are looking at more diverse income streams and tourism presents opportunities for them.
- New models of funding available in urban areas, such as Business Improvement Districts, are not as readily available or appropriate in rural areas. However, there is greater potential for the involvement of community and the 'third sector' (not-for-profit bodies and charities), which adds to the distinctiveness of the rural product. There are also rural specific measures in place such as Sustainable Development Funds in all National Parks and AONBs, and the RDPE Local Action for Rural Communities funding. These funding streams could benefit rural tourism growth if targeted effectively.

The Action Plan

Rural tourism offers significant growth potential for the wider England visitor economy. This Action Plan recognises that this growth potential must be developed with 'wise growth' principles. This includes creating richer experiences and increasing the appreciation of the landscape and its produce which encourages more responsible behaviour. Ultimately, businesses will draw on the best of the locality to meet visitor expectations, maximising economic returns that stay within the area and support key rural assets, and do so in a way that is a benefit rather than a burden to the environment and resident community.

Objective 1: To diversify and modernise rural tourism products to generate business opportunities suited to local environments and communities and develop a more year round visitor offer.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	PARTNER SIGN UP	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
i. Develop existing and new visitor activities and experiences that are less weather dependent, appeal to visitors throughout the year and reflect and support the local area (i.e. not imported in).		Activity providers (e.g. extreme sports, schools); Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); British Waterways; British Beer and Pub Association; Camping and Caravanning Club; Environment Agency; Tourism businesses; Farmers; Forestry Commission; Landowners; Local Authorities; National Trust; Natural England; National Park Authorities; Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; Rural Communities; Sustrans; ; The Caravan Club; The National Forest; Water Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total increase in volume and value with a measurable increase outside of the peak season.
ii. Develop traditional and new low impact and low carbon products and experiences in rural areas informed by consumer trends and behaviours (e.g. walking, cycling, Glamping, tepees, yurts, camping huts and shielings; slow tourism; outdoor concerts; museums and parks at night) and suited to local environments and communities.		Tourism businesses; Third Sector; Tourism Associations; VisitEngland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in new products and experiences. Increase in volume and value.
iii. Liaise with CLG to identify how the new National Planning Framework can facilitate wise rural tourism growth.	DCMS	Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG); Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS); Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra); National Park Authorities; Planning Authorities; VisitEngland	
iv. Identify best practice on the connection between planning and tourism at the local level, and community engagement in the planning process, to improve understanding and realise the growth opportunities.	Local Government Improvement; Royal Town Planning Institute	Action for Market Towns; AONBs; Destination Management Organisations (DMOs); Local Authorities; Local Government Improvement and Development; Nation Park Authorities; Royal Town Planning Institute; Trade Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning approval rates for tourism based applications.
v. Identify underutilised or redundant rural assets and support and facilitate owners to realise their tourism potential (e.g. Eden Project).		AONBs; British Waterways; British Beer and Pub Association; Country Land and Business Association; DCMS; DMOs; English Heritage; Historic Houses Association; Forestry Commission; Local Authorities; Ministry of Defence; National Park Authorities; National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact of rural tourism from new developments using redundant rural assets. Increased use of assets.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	PARTNER SIGN UP	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
		Trust; The National Trust; VisitEngland	
vi. Adapting the distribution of funding schemes to encourage the development of facilities that are less weather dependent.	DCMS; Defra; DBIS; VisitEngland	DCMS; Defra; Department for Business Innovation and Skills; DMOs; VisitEngland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of developments supported by ERDF; EC Rural Development Funding; RDPE or Regional Growth Fund that are not weather dependent.
vii. Utilise 'attract and disperse' marketing to encourage urban and rural connectivity to help deliver growth and spread the benefits of growth (particularly important to grow business tourism in rural areas).	DMOs	Action for Market Towns; AONBs; DMOs; Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs); National Park Authorities; VisitEngland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased evidence of 'attract and disperse' activities and impacts.
viii. Partners at the local level to ensure that tourism businesses have access to skills, support and business advice in remote rural areas.	LEPs; Local Authorities	Chambers of Commerce; DMOs; Federation of Small Business; LEPs; Local Authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism business penetration levels. • Business satisfaction. • Business growth levels.

Objective 2: To increase consumer awareness, understanding and enjoyment of the products and experiences available in rural areas.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	PARTNER SIGN UP	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
i. Develop messages (through market research) that reflect the distinctive nature of England's rural products and experiences throughout the year (for example the local food offer).	VisitEngland	AONBs; Historic Houses Association; Hidden Britain; Forestry Commission; Local Food Groups; National Park Authorities; Natural England; The National Trust; VisitEngland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions and understanding increase. • Increase in visitation levels and spend.
ii. Increase the promotion of England's rural products and experiences by including rural messages in England promotions nationally and internationally and using new media and viral marketing techniques to engage younger audiences.	VisitEngland	AONBs; DMOs; Historic Houses Association; Hidden Britain; Forestry Commission; National Park Authorities; The National Trust; The National Forest; VisitBritain; VisitEngland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in volume and value of domestic and international visitors.
iii. Identify target markets with a propensity to purchase rural tourism products and target them	VisitEngland (with DMO support).	VisitEngland; DMOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in visitation levels and spend.

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through marketing communications.			
iv. Work with wider broadcast and media partners (e.g. Countryfile; Coast; Time Team; Spring Watch) and large events (e.g. IronMan, Tour of Britain) to increase England's exposure of rural tourism assets and capture more visits.	DMOs; VisitEngland	DMOs; Forestry Commission; Natural England; VisitEngland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in volume and value of domestic visits.
v. Identify routes to market that support rural businesses and communities (which are small and dispersed), for example, supermarkets, on pack promotions, mountain bike and other outdoor sports magazines and publishers of travel guides.	VisitEngland	British Beer and Pub Association; DMOs; VisitEngland	
vi. Review and build on available sources of rural tourism performance and trends data.	VisitEngland	Tourism businesses; DMOs; Local Authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More robust, timely and accessible data to allow better business decisions.
vii. Support efforts to increase quality broadband coverage in rural areas to deliver business growth and effective marketing and communication of the rural tourism offer.		Country Land and Business Association; Defra; DMOs; Federation of Small Business; National Farmers Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in broadband coverage.

Objective 3: To encourage rural communities and economies to benefit from the value of rural tourism by taking ownership of the development, management, protection and conservation of rural assets and locations.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	PARTNER SIGN UP	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
i. Increase local community ownership, support for and use of their rural tourism assets.		Action for Market Towns; Action with Communities in Rural England; Countryside Fund; Defra; DMOs; Hidden Britain; Local Authorities; Parish Councils; Rural Community Councils Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in number of community led developments and projects.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	PARTNER SIGN UP	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
ii. Increase the number and geographic coverage of local solutions to manage the impacts of tourism, between business and environmental asset managers, enabling income from tourism (and visitors) to contribute.		AONBs; Tourism Businesses; English Heritage; Forestry Commission; Historic Houses Association; Local Authorities; National Park Authorities; National Trust; Natural England; The National Forest; Third Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of schemes. • Impact of schemes. • Geographic coverage.
iii. Encourage destinations to have visitor travel plans in place and to work with businesses and accommodation providers to promote things to enjoy that require reduced travel.	DMOs; Trade Associations	Accommodation providers; Defra; Department for Transport; DMOs; Local Authorities; Transport Operators; VisitEngland; Visitor Attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in car volumes and distances / amount of use (mileage or hours) in identified locations. • Number of travel plans.
iv. Destinations and public transport operators to develop 'hubs' from which there is a concentration of car free options with car parking (e.g. walks, cycle hire, bus and rail services). This would integrate with public transport, accommodation and other visitor experiences.		AONBs; Tourism businesses; DMOs; Local Authorities; National Park Authorities; Ramblers Association; The National Forest; Transport Operators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in car volumes and distances / amount of use (mileage or hours) in identified locations. • Increase in dwell time.
v. Identify and share best practice in rural public transport that meets the needs of visitors and communities e.g. Smart ticketing; electric bikes; car clubs.	VisitEngland; DMOs	Transport Operators; Local Authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in awareness and application of rural public transport initiatives and solutions.
vi. Improve business resilience to rising fuel costs by focussing business support and sustainable tourism initiatives on providing tailored advice on the importance of energy efficiency, opportunities to switch to alternative lower cost fuels, maximise the range of travel options and reduce food miles.	Energy Companies	DMOs; Energy Saving Trust; VisitEngland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in the % of rural tourism businesses reliant on expensive fuel sources - oil, non-mains gas.

APPENDIX

Rural tourism products and experiences include:

Walking; adventure sports; sightseeing and visiting villages; farm shops; cycling; mountain-biking; canal boating; camping and caravanning, horse-riding; fishing; nature; bird watching; painting; arts and crafts; music and dance; literary, drama and music festivals; conservation holidays; visiting historic sites; museums; enjoying food, drink and accommodation in rural locations; business meetings and team building.

Rural tourism assets include:

Farms; agriculture; waterways (rivers and canals); country parks; rural coast and its hinterlands; rural towns, market towns and villages; built heritage, including churches, historic houses and archaeological sites; gardens; the natural environment, including lakes, woodlands, mountains, hills, designated landscapes such as national parks and AONBs, wildlife habitats and geological sites, including nature reserves and dark sky reserves, air quality, tranquillity, biodiversity; shops, pubs, post offices, restaurants, banks, rural tourism businesses, attractions, wildlife venues such as zoos and animal attractions; holiday parks, hotels, caravan and camping sites and other accommodation; rural transport and infrastructure (bus, rail and boat services; public footpaths and rights of way, bridleways, national trails and cycle paths).