

## NAAONB Written Evidence to EFRA committee's inquiry into the role of tourism in supporting rural growth in England

The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB) is a charity that promotes the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty, and advances the education, understanding and appreciation of the public in relation to this, in and around Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), other Protected Areas, and those landscapes for which designation might be pursued.

In addition, the NAAONB promotes the efficiency and effectiveness of those organisations promoting or representing AONBs, other Protected Areas and those landscapes for which designation might be pursued. Its membership comprises AONB partnerships, local authorities, private sector bodies, and individuals with an interest in promoting the aims of the NAAONB.

A number of AONB partnerships<sup>1</sup> have responded individually to the call for evidence and the comments of the NAAONB should be seen as supportive and supplementary to these.

Thank you for giving the NAAONB the opportunity to provide evidence to the EFRA committee's inquiry into the role of tourism in supporting rural growth in England.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are nationally protected landscapes, safeguarded in the national interest because their landscape character and natural beauty are valued as outstanding. They, in common with National Parks, have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty.

In 2011 the potential for the growth of sustainable tourism in Protected Landscapes was recognised in the Rural Economy Growth Review statement<sup>2</sup>. Though no direct funding was made available to support sustainable tourism in AONBs, Defra set up the Rural Tourism Programme (RTP) which led directly to **an Accord** between NAAONB, Defra and VisitEngland. The Accord was signed by the NAAONB Chairman, the then-Minister with responsibility for AONBs and the VisitEngland CEO at Landscapes for Life Conference 2013 in Suffolk.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> AONB partnerships, with a lower case p, is the generic term used by the NAAONB to refer to AONB Partnerships, Conservation Boards and any other organisation recognized as the lead governance body for an AONB.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/183287/regr-tourism-mainpoints.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183287/regr-tourism-mainpoints.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Working Towards Sustainable Tourism in England's AONBs an Accord

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A shared vision was developed across the three organisations (Box 1).

**Box 1. A shared vision for tourism in England's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.**

Vision: Local business communities, AONB partnerships and destination organisations work collaboratively with each other and with the support of national bodies to deliver effective actions that grow sustainable tourism in AONBs. Tourism in AONBs is developed in ways which support the Strategic Framework for Tourism in England, contributing to and supporting local economies and communities, and which ensure the natural beauty of AONBs is conserved, enhanced, and their special qualities understood and widely enjoyed.

The Accord led to much closer working between Defra, Visit England and the AONB Family. This worked well until the last general election after which reorganisation in VisitEngland and VisitBritain has led to a loss of momentum.

Until May 2015, VisitEngland was encouraging DMOs to work more closely with AONB partnerships, and more detail on this is given below.

A by-product of the 2011 Autumn Statement was the **Rural Tourism Evaluation Framework**<sup>4</sup>. URS was commissioned by Defra to develop a framework and baseline for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the RTP. One component of this evaluation was to consider the effectiveness of the Accord and in doing so, it helped develop a picture of the importance of AONBs as destinations for sustainable rural tourism (Box 2).

**Box 2. The importance of Rural Tourism in AONBs.**

- There are an estimated 146m trips to areas designated as AONB's, accounting for 5.7% of all trips to the natural environment in 2011-12.
- This trend has remained similar over the four study years, and highlights the value of AONBs to the rural tourism economy.
- Considering the number of trips to AONBs and expenditure associated to AONBs we can see that there is an average of £11.87 per trip to an AONB area in 2012-13, higher than the figure for trips to non AONB areas, £7.07.
- In total around £2bn is spent whilst on trips to AONBs.
- The proportion of employment and businesses related to tourism in AONB areas stands at 17% and 12% respective. This is higher than the respective figures for England.

In the report, URS, referring to the Accord, made a number of observations:

- Levels of sustainable tourism within AONBs are under developed and provide growth potential.
- There is a need to improve collaboration between AONB partnerships and DMOs to facilitate the growth in rural tourism.

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between Defra, VisitEngland and the NAAONB - <http://www.landscapesforlife.org.uk/images/NAAONB-Defra-VisitEngland-Working-Towards-Sustainable-Tourism-in-England-July-2012.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> URS study prepared for Defra on "Rural Tourism Evaluation Framework" Feb 2014.

- There is a need to unlock tourism potential in AONBs by diversifying and modernising the offer, and generating business opportunities appropriate to local environments and communities.
- There is a need to encourage local businesses, communities and other local stakeholders to benefit from the potential for sustainable tourism in AONBs through working together for the conservation and enhancement of their special qualities, and developing and managing their contribution to the visitor economy.

The NAAONB feels that URS Rural Tourism Evaluation Framework February 2014 is a very useful source of information and has relevance to the wider rural tourism picture.

Over the years AONBs partnerships, individually and often in collaboration with other AONB partnerships and National Park Authorities, have set up and delivered Rural Tourism projects. One of particular note, as it received significant support from Defra through the RDPE, was **Our Land** (Box3).

### **Box 3. Our Land.**

Our Land set out to create a place to develop and promote sustainable tourism in protected landscapes. Its core objectives were

- managing positive change within the tourism sector to benefit the environment, culture and heritage of protected landscapes,
- increasing visitors' enjoyment and understanding of the special qualities of these landscapes, and
- benefitting the rural economy by developing innovative, sustainable tourism.

Launched in autumn 2011, Our Land was co-ordinated by the South East Protected Landscapes (SEPL) group. Made up of nine of the 10 protected landscapes (AONBs and National Parks) in the region, the SEPL group successfully bid to the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) for a four-year project to develop and promote sustainable rural tourism in their areas.

If Our Land were seen as a 'task and finish' project it could be judged a success. It met its targets, has been properly reported, claimed and has been fully audited. Examples of targets met include

- Probably now exceeding the target of 36,000 bed nights,
- Over 1000 tourism businesses representing around 1200 holiday experiences
- 60 training/ business development events for tourism businesses – these were particularly valued by the businesses,
- 12 Marketing partnerships with the RSPB, Ordnance Survey, the Princes Countryside Trust, Visit Kent and others,
- 50 e newsletters,
- Visitor Data base of 14,200,
- Creation of an on-line landscape training tool for businesses, and
- The final report noted 28 jobs created and 155 safeguarded (using a calculation method approved by Defra).

**Marketing:** In addition to the 34 AONB partnerships encouraging rural tourism in their areas, the AONB designation provides a valuable marketing opportunity to 200 individual local authorities who have all or part of an AONB within their administrative boundaries.

Unfortunately, this marketing opportunity of promoting Outstandingly Naturally Beautiful Areas nationally and internationally is not realised by the national tourism agencies. As explained above, the Accord had led to progress being made with VisitEngland and the NAAONB had worked with VisitBritain on the Countryside is Great campaign encouraging them to use individual AONBs in their marketing. Today there is little evidence of these areas being recognized.

VisitEngland had been encouraging DMOs to engage with AONB partnerships in developing their marketing of these areas. The NAAONB considers AONB partnerships best placed to explain and demonstrate why their areas are exceptional rural destinations and by working with DMOs, this message can be disseminated more effectively.

At present, even though many of England's DMOs cover all or part of an AONB, very few make reference to the designation. There are some DMOs that actually have the same name as that of the AONB but make no reference to it being designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There is one DMO that has been established by an AONB partnership that promotes the designation, but finds itself apparently in competition with a similarly named alternative DMO that does not acknowledge the AONB status.

The NAAONB fully understands that the abbreviation, AONB, does not work effectively in marketing terms, but the term Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty clearly does convey the specialness of these areas of countryside. The media is progressively becoming aware of the phrase and uses it regularly to describe beautiful areas and sometimes refers to National Parks as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty designation is uniquely British. This designation does not exist anywhere else in the world, but is recognized, by the IUCN – The World Conservation Union as a Category V Protected Area. It is a unique selling point for the English countryside and the NAAONB hopes this can be appreciated by the national agencies.

Moreover, the AONB designation exemplifies partnership working and a collaborative approach to place-based solutions pulls together many strands of rural economic development – destination management, marketing, local business support, local transport solutions etc.

It is interesting to note that VisitWales refer to the 5 AONBs in Wales widely <http://www.visitwales.com/explore/areas-of-outstanding-natural-beauty/natural-beauty>.

In marketing tourism in AONBs, the emphasis must be on ensuring sustainability. There are cases where already the level of visitors is too great and the special characteristics are at risk. Sustainable and high quality tourism generates its own marketing through social media, reviews and word of mouth as is being exemplified by VisitBritain's the Countryside is Great campaign.

**Access:** AONB partnerships are not responsible for maintaining the access infrastructure in their areas. That is a local authority responsibility. They do, however, work closely with the 200 local authorities that have AONB interests. AONB partnerships do promote and facilitate access to their areas. Rights of Way networks are underfunded and access to these networks is fundamental to rural tourism. Walking, cycling and, to a lesser extent, horse riding have the potential to be major draw for visitors to rural areas. Some AONBs report that currently many rights of way need major repairs, and ongoing maintenance.

The majority of the National Trails run through AONBs and AONB partnerships play an important role in their management and promotion. The existing 15 National Trails have been suffering from reduced funding for many years and this is beginning to impact on the quality of the routes. A recent example of this was that Natural England proposed an in year 50% cut in funding for the National Trails. Many AONB partnerships report that if this had happened, several National Trails would have closed. They also report that if further cuts to National Trails are realised, this will severely limit their ability to enhance these important tourism resources. The National Trails network is now being added to by the creation of the England Coast Path. This, combined with the existing Trails provides great access to the AONBs and National Parks and could be a massive tourism draw. However they need to be properly funded. The National Trail with the best evidence base is the South West Coast Path National Trail and in the recently published report "The impact of investments & storms on the economic benefits provided by the South West Coast Path National Trail to the region between 2010 and 2014"<sup>5</sup> a number of key findings were highlighted (Box 4).

**Box 4. The impact of investments & storms on the economic benefits provided by the South West Coast Path National Trail to the region between 2010 and 2014**

Key findings - Between 2010 and 2014

- South West Coast Path users grew by 11% from 7.8 million to 8.7 million / year,
- Expenditure by South West Coast Path users increased by £86.7 million from £382 million to £468 million,
- Number of full time equivalent jobs sustained by expenditure incurred by South West Coast Path walkers increased by 1,877 to 10,610,
- Overall spend by South West Coast Path walkers increased by 22.7%, compared to 12.2% for tourism as a whole within the region, and
- The slight decline during 2014 is thought to be a result of the damage to the Coast Path and other infrastructure by the storms of early 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The impact of investments & storms on the economic benefits provided by the South West Coast Path National Trail to the region between 2010 and 2014 – South West Coast National Trail December 2015. More details available at [www.southwestcoastpath.org.uk/research](http://www.southwestcoastpath.org.uk/research)

The South West Coast Path passes through 6 AONBs and one National Park.

**Funding and fiscal policies:** The LEADER programme has been very effective in many AONBs in helping to support and encourage rural diversification. Examples include The Chilterns Conservation Board being the beneficiary of a Leader grant in the last two rounds and the related projects have had a lasting legacy, and Cranborne Chase AONB Partnership receiving a grant from LEADER to initiate Discover Nadder which resulted in the establishment of Discover Chalke Valley, Discover Cranborne Chase and Discover Wyllye which in turn, led to the 'Enhancing the Visitor Economy of Cranborne Chase AONB' report<sup>6</sup>.

The NAAONB would like to see a continuation of this type of grant scheme which encourages rural diversification. However, this third LEADER round is felt to be overly bureaucratic by some AONB partnerships and has deterred many rural businesses from applying citing "the size of the grants does not justify the time input" as a reason. Other recent rural tourism grant schemes such as Defra's 'Grant for Championing Great British Food Tourism' are similarly very welcome in principle but the application process needs to be simplified.

The Local Enterprise Partnerships are a potential source of funding but the application process is not transparent and again, as experienced in the Chilterns, the LEPs have favoured major infrastructure projects and the Chilterns Conservation Board has struggled to generate interest in visitor economy projects.

For many years AONB partnerships have been able to offer Sustainable Development Funds. These have been modest in comparison to those available to the National Parks Authorities which receive around £200K a year. To provide perspective on relative funding, funding for the 34 AONBs (15% of England's land area) is just under £6 million in comparison to the 10 National Parks (around 9% of England's land area) which is just under £60 million. Nonetheless, these funds have been spent supporting sustainable rural tourism offers and the gearing of non-exchequer funding and the innovation shown have been impressive. In the past, the Regional Development Agencies were able to support revenue costs which played an important role developing sustainable tourism work. For example, the Forest of Bowland AONB Partnership used funding from their RDA to develop the Sustainable Bowland project<sup>7</sup> which has evolved into the Bowland Experience (Box 5).

Some AONB partnerships claim there are problems with the inconsistent, short term grant based approach. They suggest that this has happened throughout the years and continues through initiatives like Discover England Fund. The NAAONB feels that an

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ccwwdaonb.org.uk/publications/general-aonb-publications/>

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[http://www.forestofbowland.com/files/uploads/pdfs/strategies/SUSTAINABLE\\_BOWLAND\\_final%20report%20.pdf](http://www.forestofbowland.com/files/uploads/pdfs/strategies/SUSTAINABLE_BOWLAND_final%20report%20.pdf)

approach should be adopted where sustainable rural tourism is a priority and consistent, predictable funding is made available. There is the potential to create enduring and positive partnerships, like AONB partnerships, involving Local Authorities, DMOs and landscape-based partnerships which would have the responsibility to manage the quality of the destination/the rural area and not just promote it to be exploited. We consider that this would achieve better more consistent outcomes.

#### **Box 5. Bowland Experience**

Bowland Experience Limited is a network that supports like-minded businesses to develop and promote the sustainable tourism opportunities within the Forest of Bowland. Its aims are

- To work collaboratively to ensure businesses in the area deliver social, economic and environmental benefit, while at the same time enhancing visitor experiences,
- To enable related businesses across the AONB to connect and share ideas and good practice, and
- To provide opportunities to develop and promote sustainable experiences, activities and products for visitors linked with the Forest of Bowland AONB brand.

Bowland Experience Limited (BEx for short!) has been formed as a commercial subsidiary of the charity, Champion Bowland.

The company's directors are local tourism operators and it has been formed as a "Company Limited by Guarantee". This means that the members of the company, instead of owning shares, agree to guarantee its debts, limited to £1 per member. In every other respect it is just like any other limited company and has the same powers, rights and responsibilities. Any profits made by BEx will go to Champion Bowland to support its charitable purposes.

AONBs should be regarded as integral elements of the country's economic infrastructure requiring improved investment. The developmental work the NAAONB and the AONB Family have been doing over the last 16 years has provided a platform and the skillset to develop a more progressive model of landscape management and engage better with new partners including business. This has clearly increased the level of non-exchequer funding available to deliver. However, a more proportionate, outcome-focused, distribution of funding from government across the designated landscapes is the only approach that will provide the necessary working capital to grow the potential of the AONB Family and transform its ability to generate income at the local level.

**Local environment and character:** People choose to visit AONBs because of their outstanding landscapes, natural and cultural heritage, and the opportunities they offer for outdoor recreation, quiet enjoyment, peace, tranquillity and active challenges. Each AONB is different and this individual distinctiveness is part of their appeal.

These special qualities should form the basis for the future development, management and marketing of tourism. The level and type of tourism activity should take account of the capacity of the individual AONB's environment and communities. It should be recognized that some places are valued for being wild and remote.

**Infrastructure and skills:** The NAAONB believes that investment in high quality car-free transport that both forms a strategic network between, and provides access to, these beautiful places is really important.

With reference to Our Land, the project also provided training opportunities for the tourism businesses; these were led by the AONB and National Park Teams and included understanding the landscape, copy writing, operating in a more environmentally friendly manner, photography, local food etc. There are very skilled people working in AONBs that have the potential to help the businesses get the most out of the landscapes sustainably.

**Defra role:** Defra could and should take a leadership role both within the Defra Family and across departments. When opportunities arise, such as the Discover England Fund, Defra could bring together appropriate elements of the Defra Family to map out a strategic approach to preparing plans and bids. This could be extended to other potential funds such as Heritage Lottery and Big Lottery Fund.

Defra could also play a cross-government coordinating role on rural tourism as a whole, ensuring that the Tourism agencies pay due regard to the opportunity offered and needs of rural tourism.

**NAAONB**

**6<sup>th</sup> September 2016**