

# Working for the Countryside

A strategy for rural tourism in England 2001-2005



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The English Tourism Council and the Countryside Agency have produced a joint strategy for rural tourism in England.

At a time of significant change in the countryside, tourism is increasingly seen as part of the answer to supporting the rural economy and communities. Handled sensitively, tourism can also be a creative force in conserving the rural heritage, biodiversity and landscapes on which it depends. However, if it is to achieve its true potential, it needs to be well managed. Rural tourism needs good co-ordination between the many thousands of rural enterprises and organisations involved.

The Rural White Paper, 2000, described tourism as 'a key rural industry'. It also identified the need for a strategy between the English Tourism Council and the Countryside Agency, to provide a clear focus for national, regional and local action. The strategy has evolved following a wide ranging consultation exercise and ongoing public debate on rural issues.

## **We have a shared vision for rural tourism in England, which will be achieved when:**

Tourism is widely recognised as a vital source of prosperity throughout rural England, but one that does not dominate the rural economy. Owners of tourism businesses and people who work there are satisfied with their quality of life and future prospects, and feel well supported. The landscapes, cultural richness and biodiversity of the English countryside are increasingly seen as a reason for overseas visitors to come to the UK and for British visitors to stay here on holiday.

All visitors are warmly welcomed, enjoy a rich mix of accommodation, local gastronomy, places to visit and opportunities for outdoor activities, and are always keen to return. They have access to excellent information where and when they need it and can get around using a variety of transport.

Local residents appreciate that income from visitors helps to keep open many of the services they use and do not feel swamped by tourists, some of whom are their own guests. Tourism plays a major role in supporting the prosperity and conservation of market towns and protected areas. Any damage to the environment caused by visitors or inappropriate tourism development is minimal and declining.



## Key principles

Five principles lie behind the strategy. These all came through strongly during the consultation.

### Relating supply to demand

Growth should be based on market opportunities, with better marketing and sound business assessment and support.

### Adding value locally

More local benefit should be gained from tourism, through local information provision and promoting and sourcing local products and services.

### Promoting quality of experience

Universal quality should be assured without bland standardisation, based on local rural distinctiveness and pride in good service.

### Maintaining an attractive countryside

Attractive landscapes and biodiversity must be preserved, with tourism playing its part through positive support as well as visitor management.

### Taking decisions locally

Strategic directions in rural tourism need to be interpreted and largely implemented through partnership at a local level.

## Aims

The four aims of the strategy are based on the concept of sustainable tourism:

- to maintain and increase the availability and quality of employment in rural tourism enterprises
- to ensure that a high quality of visitor experience in the countryside is available to everyone
- to maintain and enhance the quality of the rural environment
- to spread the benefits of tourism throughout rural communities.

The strategy calls for an integrated approach to achieving these aims, recognising that they are mutually reinforcing and that many actions can be taken that help to meet two or more; and sometimes all four.

## Priorities for action

Sixteen priorities for action are identified, grouped under four sub-headings, which will achieve the strategic aims.

### 1. Influencing and enabling visits

#### Strengthening the marketing of rural products and destinations

We need better research on the profile of rural visitors to help market segmentation and targeted marketing campaigns. The quality of the England rural experience merits stronger promotion, including branding of products, extension of consortia, and better use of ICT; yet messages should be sensitive and accurate.

#### Increasing the local impact of visitor information

There should be a new emphasis on delivering truly local information to visitors, to encourage more spending in their immediate vicinity. The value of Tourist Information Centres in providing a service to rural communities as well as visitors is underlined, but there are opportunities also to extend information delivery through local hosts, ICT and in other ways.

#### Improving access for all visitors

The rejuvenating experience of a countryside break should be available to everyone, irrespective of physical, social or economic circumstances. Practical action can be taken to increase the accessibility of facilities and the countryside itself, boost confidence and provide options which meet the needs of young people and families, amongst others.

### 2. Enriching the rural tourism experience

#### Providing a wide range of quality accommodation

Visitors are seeking a breadth of choice of accommodation and consistent quality of overall experience (especially service) without standardisation. Participation in the harmonised National Quality Assurance Scheme should be extended, sensitively, and over-supply of accommodation avoided.

#### Bringing out local distinctiveness, culture and heritage

The richness of the visitor experience, and the cultural value added by tourism, depends on preserving and presenting those characteristics of a place which distinguish it from its neighbours. Action is needed to ensure the viability of attractions, and to draw out all the intricate aspects of our rural heritage in creative ways.

#### Promoting local produce and gastronomy

More can be done to use local foods and products as part of the rural visitor experience, which may also benefit the local economy and environment. Action includes addressing the needs and quality of rural pubs, working with food producer groups, and identifying speciality dishes to strengthen local identity.

### Making more of activity-based tourism

The growing market for activity and special interest breaks provides a particular opportunity. More research is needed on demand, supply and impact. There is potential for stronger linkages between activity suppliers and other tourism enterprises, such as accommodation, and for improved marketing.

### 3. Fostering rural tourism enterprises

#### Providing more focused business support

To be strong, the rural economy needs to be diverse. Rural businesses need sound business advice and training. Action is needed to improve co-ordination, ensure that sufficient local tourism expertise is available, and develop integrated funding packages.

#### Relating planning decisions to economic, social and environmental benefits

Planning and control of development helps maintain the attractiveness of the countryside which is essential for rural tourism. Planning decisions should, however, be more sensitive to the need for rural tourism enterprises to build on the opportunities that exist in the locality while staying sensitive to community needs.

#### Increased networking between rural tourism businesses

There are many advantages to be gained from small rural tourism enterprises working together, establishing area associations or product-specific networks, or to offer a particular service or tackle a specific issue.

#### Improving the impact of businesses on the local environment and community

Further action can be taken to encourage and assist tourism enterprises to benefit the environment and the local community, and thereby benefit themselves, through information, training and promotional incentives.

### 4. Improving the management of rural destinations

#### Identifying rural tourism destinations for integrated quality management

Good management of destinations requires an array of different, co-ordinated activity, including visitor and stakeholder feedback and monitoring of performance and satisfaction against standards. This can be based on local authority areas, or on natural areas, such as National Parks, which have particular challenges and sensitivities.

#### Strengthening the role of market towns in tourism

Market towns can provide a focus for a wide range of tourism services. The Rural White Paper identifies them as catalysts for generating prosperity in the countryside. Tourism should play a strong part in initiatives for their integrated development.



### Improving visitor and traffic management

Some individual locations require visitor management techniques to prevent and alleviate congestion and other adverse impacts. Rural tourism relies heavily on the car. Traffic management and provision of alternative transport is an important challenge. Visitors should be encouraged and enabled to explore their destination through walking, cycling and public transport.

### Supporting the conservation of landscapes and biodiversity

The tourism sector should lend its full weight to schemes aimed at maintaining the attractiveness of the countryside. It can play a more active part through channelling visitor spending and investment into initiatives which support conservation.

### Involving local communities in tourism management

Local people should have a chance to participate in the planning and management of tourism in their area, through greater consultation, local initiatives such as provision of events and information, and making use of strengthened structures at a parish and community level.

## We must implement the strategy together

The English Tourism Council and the Countryside Agency will take a lead on ensuring this strategy is implemented. We have identified:

- Structures to help our two agencies work more closely together on tourism.

- A set of specific actions which we will take, including supporting research, identifying and disseminating good practice, supporting pilot projects, strengthening advisory material, services and training, and encouraging better communication and networks.

However, our function is primarily advisory. Success will depend on others. All agencies concerned with tourism and rural affairs should reflect on the key issues and direction of the strategy, which have been summarised above.

## National, regional and local implementation

**At a national level**, a wide range of bodies are implicated by the strategy, including government departments, agencies involved in conservation and land management, and tourism interests. To help co-ordination and encourage action, we will establish a Rural Tourism Panel and ensure that rural tourism issues are brought to the fore in existing tourism and countryside liaison forums.

**At a regional level**, Regional Tourist Boards and the regional offices of the Countryside Agency will work together to promote rural tourism that is sustainable. They will help to co-ordinate the regional tourism activity of the Regional Development Agencies, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the European Union and others.

**At a local level**, we will encourage local authorities to continue to take a lead. Where appropriate, they should form mechanisms for co-ordinating action between local stakeholders, especially rural tourism enterprises.

Copies of the full strategy report, priced £15, can be obtained from:

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Countryside Agency Publications  
PO Box 125  
Wetherby  
West Yorkshire LS23 7EP  
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Minicom: 0870 120 7405 (for hard of hearing)  
Or via [www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)  
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Published by the English Tourism Council  
Thames Tower, Black's Road, London W6 9EL  
Tel: 020 8563 3000

The Countryside Agency  
John Dower House, Crescent Place, Cheltenham,  
Gloucestershire GL50 3RA  
Tel: 01242 521381

ISBN 0 86143 244 4  
ETC 8214  
CAX 48  
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Printed in England