

Rural Tourism in the South East
A Strategy for Future Action
A Consultation Draft







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INTRODUCTION

The Rural White Paper, 'Our Countryside - the future', established a new set of priorities for rural policy with a strong regional focus. Among many other issues it recognised the importance of tourism to rural areas and required Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to work with Regional Tourist Boards (RTBs) to prepare rural tourism strategies for their areas. This draft strategy has been prepared for consultation with key stakeholders.

The strategy is timely. While the South East may have suffered less than some regions, the Foot & Mouth epidemic has demonstrated, beyond doubt, the extent to which tourism contributes to the rural economy, and also the extent to which so many aspects of that economy are interdependent. When, as was the case during much of 2001, visitors stay away from the countryside, a whole range of businesses suffer, not just those most normally associated with tourism. Yet there are very real opportunities for rural tourism to be further developed in the South East region. Optimising the benefits which tourism can bring to the rural economy calls for better co-ordinated policies and programmes, a clear understanding of where the opportunities lie, and action to realise the potential.

A strategy such as this cannot and should not be implemented by any one body alone. Its successful achievement will require the collaboration and co-operation of others. A primary aim of this consultation draft is to identify key partners in the action we might take together to strengthen the rural economy and improve the quality of life for those living in the countryside.

The questionnaire distributed with this draft will help to focus your comments and response.



The South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) is pleased to be taking forward actions from the Government's Rural White Paper, published in November 2000, together with the Countryside Agency and the Government Office for the South East. This draft Rural Tourism in the South East, A Strategy for Future Action, A Consultation Draft has come through SEEDA's Tourism Sector Group and has been supported by the Tourist Boards. The sector is critical to the economy of the region and, after the consultation period, the agreed strategy will form part of the Regional Economic Strategy.

Tourism has been through a very difficult time last year. Lack of visitors and visitor spend has had a devastating impact on the tourism industry in the region, even though we had only a small number of cases of Foot and Mouth. The industry has been further hit by the events of September 11th.

The whole industry is undergoing change in its support structures and this report must be seen as part of the wider future framework for the industry in the region, for both urban and rural areas.

This draft strategy recognises the great rural assets in the region and suggests how we can build on these and set out our priorities for action, looking ahead over the next five years.

This is a consultation document and we welcome your views.

Anthony Dunnett

Chief Executive
South East England Development Agency



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rural White Paper, 'Our Countryside - the future', established a new set of priorities for rural policy with a strong regional focus. It recognised the importance of tourism to rural areas and required Regional Development Agencies to work with Regional Tourist Development Boards (RTBs) to prepare rural tourism strategies for their areas. This draft strategy, suggesting how rural tourism might be further developed in the region, is now put out for consultation and response.

Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), which is estimated to have cost the region around £545 million in lost tourism revenue, showed the value of tourism to rural economy and how so many aspects of the economy are interdependent. If visitors stay away from the countryside, a whole range of businesses suffer, not just those normally associated with tourism. Visitors to the countryside, whether on holiday, on business or out for the day, spend money in village shops, pubs and restaurants and in market towns, are both attracted by and help to support our heritage, and provide markets for local produce and opportunities for local entrepreneurship.

Nationally, visitors to the countryside spend over £12 billion annually and this spending supports 380,000 jobs. 25% of all holiday stays by British people in England are in the countryside. Moreover, until 2001, the market had been growing - between 1993 and 2000 the number of tourist trips to the countryside grew 50%, and 24% of all leisure day visits are to the countryside.

In the South East rural tourism was estimated to be worth rather more than £1 billion in 2000, providing direct employment for between 30,000 and 40,000 people. Most rural tourism businesses in the South East are small scale and independent - generally family-owned and managed. Many, including those associated with farms, provide supplementary income without which families might be forced off the land.

Tourism and the environment are intimately linked. Tourism depends on an attractive environment to succeed; the environment - both built and natural - depends to a significant extent on the income generated by visitors. Much of the appeal of rural England comes from a man-made and managed landscape. The decline in farm incomes poses a threat to the quality of the farmed landscape and leads to continuing pressure to diversify. Meanwhile there is increased awareness and acceptance of the benefits of well-managed tourism within rural communities. While visitors can put pressure on the countryside, effective management regimes both minimise environmental damage and enhance visitors experience. Traffic generated by visitors is part of the wider issue concerning transport infrastructure within the region generally and the need to encourage alternative forms of transport.

September 11th has affected tourism across the world. Coming on top of FMD, the need to market the region actively has never been stronger, and there are identifiable market opportunities to be tapped.

Strengths: The South East region has great strengths: an attractive and varied countryside and coast, distinctive small towns and villages, a superb heritage, excellent footpath network, proximity to London and 'gateway' entry points, an extensive network of cultural events and excellent sporting venues.





Weaknesses: The region has an image of overcrowding and lacking dramatic physical features. Some of its accommodation is of variable quality and relatively high cost. It lacks branded 'products' and its marketing is fragmented. It has poor East/West transport links. The tourism industry has recruitment difficulties and skills gaps, particularly in catering.

Opportunities: There are growth markets to be tapped (the over 55s, short breaks, near Continentals, activity and special interest holidays, etc) and an opportunity to develop a properly branded farm-based accommodation 'product'. There are two prospective National Parks, under used assets such as the River Thames and Thames footpath, a growing interest in healthy lifestyles and green issues, and opportunities to encourage a wide range of countryside activities (walking, cycling etc) and to promote local produce.

Threats: Inappropriate development could lead to loss of distinctiveness, degradation of the environment and loss of tranquility. It can be difficult to access good advice for those wishing to diversify into tourism and leisure. There is too much fragmentation of effort. Tourism tends to be seasonal, and there is increasing competition from overseas and other UK markets. Moreover, the continuing impact of September 11th makes it harder to attract long-haul overseas visitors, with implications particularly for the better known heritage attractions in the South East.

The draft strategy sets out a raft of 'strategic priorities for action', specific to the needs and opportunities of the South East, under the following headings:

- Influencing and Enabling Visits – ways of strengthening the South East's image and improving marketing;
- Enriching the Tourism Experience – improving the range and quality of accommodation available to visitors, promoting local food, making the most of activity based tourism opportunities and the region's heritage and cultural strengths;
- Fostering rural tourism enterprises – better business support, advice on planning issues, better networking between rural businesses and promotion of good environmental practice;
- Improving the management of rural destinations – promotion of 'Total Quality Management' where appropriate, building on the tourism potential of the region's market towns and looking for ways of improving public transport.

Implementing this ambitious strategy requires your collaboration and co-operation. We are now looking to identify key partners in the action we might take together to strengthen the rural economy and improve the quality of life for those living in the countryside.

The questionnaire distributed with this draft will help to focus your comments and response.





THE CASE FOR ACTION TO SUPPORT RURAL TOURISM

What is rural tourism?

Rural tourism includes both those staying away from home for one night or more and those out for the day in the countryside - visiting attractions, walking, cycling or enjoying a wide range of countryside activities. They spend money in village shops, pubs and restaurants and in market towns. They provide a market for local produce and opportunities for local entrepreneurship. Those staying overnight will do so in hotels or inns, bed & breakfast establishments or self-catering accommodation, on the farm, on caravan parks or campsites, or with friends and relatives. Those out for the day may be from within the region or from further afield, and may include those on holiday in nearby seaside resorts or on day trips out of London. They may be visiting for a specific event or to see a particular attraction. They may have a particular interest in sport, the arts, museums or heritage, or seek educational outlets for their children. They may also be on business, for a meeting or small conference, or to look for commercial contacts and business opportunities. A proportion of those staying or visiting will be from overseas, including those from the near continent.

Statistics

"Tourism spending by visitors in the English countryside amounts to £12 billion annually and supports 380,000 jobs... One quarter of all holiday stays by British people in England are in the countryside. The countryside contains 39% of the known accommodation capacity in England, provided by 25,000 establishments. Rural images and heritage are also important in attracting overseas visitors." ('Working for the Countryside - A strategy for rural tourism in England 2001-2005' - The Countryside Agency/English Tourism Council. March 2001)

- Between 1993 and 2000 the number of tourist trips to the countryside grew by 50%, with a gradual trend towards shorter (1-3 nights) and more frequent trips (ETC 2000)
- In 1998 24% of all leisure day visits were to the countryside (ETC 2000)
- 15% of all tourists in England were hikers and ramblers (ETC 2000)

In 1998 the South East countryside hosted 2.2 million staying holiday trips, mostly by UK residents (1.8 million). In addition there were 59 million tourism day trips by UK residents and a further 100,000 day trips by visitors from overseas. Together these represent around one fifth of total holiday and leisure visits in the region.

('Farm Tourism in the Countryside' - Geoff Broom Associates for the Countryside Agency)

In 1997 tourism in the South East was worth a total of £5.1 billion (5% of the region's GDP) and provided employment directly and indirectly for some 250,000 people - 7.5% of the Region's workforce.

(Creating a World Class Tourism Destination - a vision for the South East region. Southern & South East England Tourist Boards)

More overseas tourists visit the South East than any other region outside London, generating a total of almost £1.5 billion to the regional economy (12% of the total for the UK) - twice as much as for the whole of Scotland and five times as much as for Wales.

On best estimates, rural tourism in the South East region was estimated to be worth rather more than £1 billion in 2000, providing direct employment for between 30,000 and 40,000 people.



The importance of tourism to the rural economy

'Our Countryside - the future', the Rural White paper for England (2000), recognised tourism as a 'key rural industry', playing a role in revitalising many small towns and their surrounding areas, and with considerable potential for growth.

As the recent Foot & Mouth crisis has clearly demonstrated, tourism underpins the rural economy. It provides income for a wide range of facilities and amenities in rural areas - village shops, pubs and restaurants, local transport operators, and the secondary suppliers of goods and services - without which many businesses would fail.

The region has an exceptionally rich built heritage - castles, houses, gardens, cathedrals and churches, as well as attractive towns and villages. Without the revenue generated by visitors, much of this heritage would be at risk.

The majority of rural tourism businesses in the South East are small scale and independent - generally family-owned and managed. Many, including those associated with farms, provide supplementary income without which families would be forced to move off the land.

Tourism and the environment

"Much of the appeal of rural England comes from a man-made and managed landscape, shaped by farming and a pattern of settlements and sites which reflect our history and culture'... The serious decline in farm incomes 'poses a threat to the quality of the farmed landscape... and leads to continuing pressure to diversify'. Meanwhile there is 'increased awareness and acceptance of the benefits of well-managed tourism within rural communities.'" (Working for the Countryside)

While there may be a small number of 'honey-pot' rural locations in the South East where visitor numbers put pressure on the countryside, many of these (parts of the South Downs, the Cuckmere valley, Box Hill, etc) are already subject to effective management regimes which serve both to minimise environmental damage and to enhance the visitor experience.

The traffic generated by visitors to the countryside can be a more serious issue and is part of the wider issue concerning transport infrastructure within the region generally and the need to encourage alternative forms of transport.

Tourism and the environment are intimately linked and interdependent. Tourism depends on an attractive environment to succeed; the environment, both built and natural, depends to a significant extent on the income generated by visitors.



Impact of the Foot & Mouth epidemic

The 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak has had a devastating impact on many rural tourism businesses across the region. Survey work and operator feedback undertaken by the two tourist boards indicates that the total loss to tourism in the South East region will be around £545 million. Of this figure £310 million will result from lost staying visitors and £235 million from lost day visitors.

Very few cases of FMD were confirmed within the region. However the widespread closure of the countryside (most footpaths were closed from February to July 2001), combined with a deluge of media coverage, associated apocalyptic images, and confusion over health risks resulted in major reductions to both overseas and domestic visits to the South East. Outside London, the South East region is the largest recipient of overseas visitors. Rural bed & breakfast operators, self-catering units, farm attractions and businesses specialising in rural outdoor pursuits are among those who have been hardest hit. There is clear evidence of some displacement of visitors from the countryside to seaside and city destinations within the region during the peak period of the FMD epidemic.

Tourism supports an estimated 250,000 jobs in the region and it is difficult to estimate the final impact of FMD on tourism sector jobs and incomes. Much of the impact is likely to be through reduced recruitment, particularly of seasonal staff. National estimates suggest that at least 20,000 to 30,000 jobs in tourism across the country could have been affected during 2001.

There is evidence that advanced bookings for 2002 have declined in the region. Post-FMD the rate of business recovery will depend on how quickly the public perceives that things have returned to normal and whether their perception of the countryside as a holiday and day visit destination has been affected. Strong competition for short overseas breaks promoted by low cost airline operators and other leisure opportunities present a particular challenge.

A report on Regional Development Agencies and Rural Development, completed in September 2001 (Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle, with Arup Economics and Planning) outlined various scenarios for the future of rural tourism. The key determinants were 1) the extent of recovery from the FMD crisis and 2) the success in developing regional strategic rural tourism frameworks. Weak FMD recovery without strong strategic development would result in "continued severe damage to rural tourism", while strong FMD recovery with strong strategic development could result in "the FMD crisis being a springboard for new tourism-led renaissance in the regions".

The events of September 11th will impact on tourism across the world. Coming on top of the devastation already caused by FMD, the need to promote and actively market the region's countryside along with the rural attractions, towns and villages has never been stronger.

Short-term trends in the wake of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) and the perceived terrorist threat are difficult to predict. The English Tourism Council now estimate that FMD has cost domestic tourism over £5 billion in 2001, with continuing losses in 2002 and 2003. Between 20,000 and 30,000 jobs could be affected. Worst hit areas are Cumbria and the West Country, but the South East has also suffered severely as illustrated previously.



The national Rural Task Force, set up to monitor and advise on ways of encouraging recovery of the rural economy post-FMD, recommended to Government:

- The extension of VAT, tax deferral and rate relief
- Additional funding to RDAs for the Business Recovery Fund, and
- A major promotional campaign to re-launch the countryside, based on a distinctive brand and theme

Following the publication of the report, the Secretary of State for Rural Affairs announced a £24 million extension to the Business Recovery Fund to help rural economies and small rural businesses damaged by FMD. However this was distributed solely to those regions deemed to have suffered most directly, excluding the South East. Plans to re-launch the countryside in 2002 are being considered by a steering group of Government departments in consultation with a Key Stakeholder Group on which the RDAs are represented.

September 11th has had an immediate impact on international travel. The airlines industry world-wide has reduced flight schedules and is implementing massive staff reductions. This will result in a significant reduction in long haul travellers visiting the UK for the foreseeable future, particularly from the USA. In the month of October visits from North America to the UK were down 30% on the previous year and visits from the 'rest of the world', excluding Western Europe, were down by 20%. Total visits by overseas residents were down 12% and spend by 25%. The position may pick up gradually, but bookings for at least the next year are likely to be well down on previous expectations. Business travel is likely to be affected almost as much as holiday travel, as companies seek to protect their employees from the perceived risk of air travel. The effect on European travel is less certain and much depends on how the European economy holds up against world-wide recessionary trends.

Prior to these events England was already losing out to foreign competition, with UK residents spending twice as much on countryside holidays overseas than in England. Potentially there should now be a real opportunity to recapture part of this domestic tourism market provided that the product on offer is sufficiently attractive, easy to purchase, competitively priced and well promoted, and provided also that sufficient funding is made available to mount a successful campaign.

The growth in short breaks of 1-3 nights is likely to continue. Currently the countryside is most popular with the 25-54 age group (peaking at 35-44) with or without children. Overall, rural visitors are more up-market than holidaymakers as a whole - almost 2/3rds are ABC1. 'Rural visitors show signs of becoming more discerning. There has been an increasing demand for quality accommodation and other facilities. Visitors are becoming more knowledgeable and also seek more detailed information with which to plan their stay.' (Working for the Countryside)

While the countryside was largely closed (or perceived to be closed) to visitors due to FMD, coastal resorts appear generally to have benefited. Similarly, now that British holidaymakers may be less willing to travel abroad in the wake of terrorist fears, there is a strong case for redirecting marketing effort from overseas to the domestic market through a series of well planned and carefully directed campaigns.



3 STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES & THREATS



Strengths

- Large areas of attractive and varied countryside, 1/3rd of which is within a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), with a wide range of landscape characteristics
 - Most heavily wooded region of England
 - Significant areas of Heritage Coast, with icons such as the White Cliffs of Dover, Seven Sisters and the Needles
 - The green of the countryside compared to Southern Europe and many other parts of the world
 - Attractive small towns and villages, with distinctive local character and wide variety of local styles and distinctive building materials
 - Superb heritage - castles, houses, gardens, cathedrals, churches, etc., including regional 'icons' such as Leeds Castle, Sissinghurst Garden or Canterbury Cathedral - and wide selection of other visitor attractions
 - An excellent footpath network throughout the region, with a number of sign-posted and well-maintained long distance trails
- Reasonable and varied accommodation stock dispersed throughout the region
 - Good choice of pubs and some good restaurants in rural areas
 - Proximity to London and its substantial population seeking rural recreation
 - Gateway entry points - Heathrow (just outside the region but easily accessible), Gatwick, the Channel ports and Channel Tunnel
 - Relative prosperity within the region and adjacent European countries
 - Extensive network of cultural events and venues
 - Excellent (and in some cases world class) sporting venues and opportunities



Weaknesses

- Uncertain and confused image of the region, perceived to be overcrowded and congested, not always considered as a tourism destination
 - Relative lack of dramatic physical features - the countryside is easily accessible but less demanding or romantic than, say, the Lake District or the Alps, and relatively less easily characterised
 - Variable and sometimes indifferent quality of accommodation stock and some gaps
- Relatively high cost of accommodation (e.g. Thames Valley)
 - Lack of branded 'products' such as e.g. the French 'Gites' or 'Fermes Auberges'
 - Lack of effective IT systems for promoting rural tourism and making reservations on-line
 - Fragmented marketing (by local authorities and individual businesses) dissipating impact
 - Proximity to and competition from London
 - Lack of good east/west transport links
 - Continuing poor image of the sector for a career, leading to recruitment difficulties in some areas and skills gaps, particularly in catering

Opportunities

- Development of the South East's 'gateway' role - encouraging travellers through Gatwick, Heathrow, the Channel ports and cruise terminals to explore the region
- Large population on the doorstep, including London and the near Continent
- High proportion of farmers and landowners looking for alternative income streams and better prepared to consider diversification into tourism and access.



- Growth target markets - over 55s; short stress-busting breaks; near Continent short breaks; activity and special interest holidays etc.
 - Development of a properly branded and distinctive farm-based accommodation 'product', working to agreed quality standards, backed by an effective marketing programme
 - Two prospective National Parks - the South Downs and New Forest
 - Under-used assets - River Thames, Thames footpath, etc.
 - Growing interest in healthy lifestyles and green issues
 - Further development of the South East Walks Initiative, concentrating on developing walking 'packages' for the domestic and overseas markets
 - The current fear of travel to competitor overseas destinations could present a short-term window of opportunity to attract back an increased number of visitors to the English countryside
 - Development of cycling packages based on and extending the National Cycling Network and other more local initiatives
 - Encouragement of competitive cycling events, from cross country to time trials and fun events aimed at families
 - Encouragement of other rural-based activities - horse-riding (including trails), orienteering, bird-watching, rural study centres, etc
 - Promotion/celebration of local produce - food producers collaborating with hotels, restaurants and pubs for special food weeks or festivals and the development of distinctive local/regional specialities
 - Development of an enriched rural tourism experience, linking/packaging elements such as food, accommodation, access and recreational pursuits
 - Better use/promotion of special offers via rail networks and links with local bus services for day visits and short breaks
 - Promotion of events - walking festivals, beer festivals, jazz and other music festivals, kite flying, ballooning, paragliding etc - including unusual and colourful events capable of attracting media (particularly television) coverage
- Development (subject to partnership funding) of a carefully targeted, well orchestrated and monitored long-term promotional campaign to strengthen the image of the South East as an attractive destination for those seeking a distinctive rural tourism experience. The campaign should run for a minimum of three years and preferably be ongoing thereafter, subject to yearly reviews

Threats

- Inappropriate development leading to:
 - potential loss of distinctiveness
 - degradation of the environment
- Loss of tranquillity in some areas
- Lack of or difficulty in identifying and accessing good advice and guidance for those wishing to diversify into tourism and leisure
- Lack of adequate national/regional/local policy frameworks and fragmentation of effort
- Seasonal nature of tourism in some areas
- Competition from overseas, other UK markets and alternative outlets for disposable income (e.g. the home, gardens, shopping etc)
- Any recurrence of FMD would set rural tourism back still further
- The current travel crisis will damage the global economy and make it difficult to attract long-haul overseas visitors, with implications particularly for the better known heritage attractions, including those in the South East
- Disaster scenarios unthinkable pre-September 11th may now have to be considered





STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

The main headings below and some of the priorities for action mirror those contained in “Working for the Countryside - A strategy for rural tourism in England 2001-2005”, adapted to the needs and opportunities of the South East.

Influencing and Enabling Visits

• Aim: to strengthen the South East brand image and the marketing of rural products

The South East has an image problem! It is perceived by many potential visitors as a region that is noisy, over developed, full of traffic jams and devoid of tranquil countryside. Added to this are the recent negative images associated with the FMD outbreak. Contrary to this perception, the region does possess a great diversity of attractive landscapes and an abundance of heritage sites and outstanding gardens. Stronger marketing and promotion of the region will be essential in order to recover lost visits as well as building new business. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Post FMD promotion of the South East countryside, rural villages, small towns and rural attractions
- ⇒ Further research on day visitors from London and the near continent, identifying target market segments and assessing the potential for more overnight stays and day visits to the region's countryside
- ⇒ Promotion of the South East as a premier walking destination
- ⇒ Improving the region's capacity as a potential premier cycling and horse riding destination
- ⇒ Development of better branded and distinctive countryside tourism 'packages' combining good quality accommodation, regional food, visits to attractions, access and a range of recreational pursuits, targeting specific market opportunities
- ⇒ Further development of sub-regional branded products
- ⇒ Targeted development and marketing campaign for farm-based tourism
- ⇒ Encouraging the development of local tourism consortia within the region

• Aim: to increase the local impact of visitor information

Major emphasis needs to be placed on delivering information which will stimulate greater spend in the local economy. Key priorities for action include

- ⇒ Improving the use of co-ordinated Information Communication Technology within the South East region, including introduction through Tourist Information Centres (TICs) and elsewhere of the VISIT system
- ⇒ Development of comprehensive local information packs (bedside browsers) for use by accommodation providers promoting local walks / cycle rides, local produce, public transport and information about the area
- ⇒ The VISIT system, which is supported by SEEDA, is an interactive tourist information, marketing and management system being rolled out by TICs over a three year period

• Aim: to improve accessibility for all visitors

A large and growing domestic market for the South East rural tourism product is the 'grey panther' market segment (active, retired people with disposable resources). Improving access to the countryside for the less mobile will be of considerable benefit to this sector as well as meeting the new Disability and Discrimination regulations. Key priorities for action include:



- ⇒ Joint action to identify and improve those parts of the footpath network which attract most visitors and generate the highest visitor spend
- ⇒ Advice and support for access improvements to both accommodation providers and countryside managers
- ⇒ Development and promotion of a training course targeted at accommodation providers for welcoming less mobile visitors

Enriching the Tourism Experience

• Aim: to improve the range of quality accommodation across the region

Parts of the South East region are poorly served with quality accommodation particularly in the lower price category closer to London. “With the projected growth in short-break tourism, there is a need strategically to develop rural tourism beyond the day visit market. This requires attention to the availability of quality accommodation and the promotion of integrated tourism packages (combining accommodation, activities, events or attractions)” (Working for the Countryside). Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Carrying out supply and potential demand studies, including:
 - potential markets for integrated packages as described above, and
 - activity-related rural tourism such as walking, cycling, horse riding and student breaks
- ⇒ Promoting greater uptake by providers of rural accommodation of certification under the new harmonised National Quality Assurance Scheme
- ⇒ Encouraging the development and expansion of farm-based tourism within the region, matching supply with projected demand and required standards
- ⇒ Improving networking by accommodation providers and attractions, including encouraging the development of local tourism consortia

• Aim: to promote local produce / gastronomy and gourmet tours

Parts of the South East region have a strong historical association with local food products and the development of this area of work is of significant interest for a number of rural agencies and organisations - examples include the development of Farmers Markets and local food processor groups. The region is well suited to the promotion of rural gastronomy based on locally produced ingredients and the development of short break packages which are based around the enjoyment of the countryside and high quality local foods. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Development / promotion of local foods and gourmet breaks in the South East countryside
- ⇒ Development of the *ferme auberge* concept in the South East region
- ⇒ Strengthen the links between local food producers and accommodation providers



• **Aim: to make more of activity-based tourism opportunities in the region**

A growing proportion of visitors (nationally 22%) come to the countryside specifically for an activity holiday. The region has an exceptional network of quality long distance and circular themed walks, as well as cycling, riding and opportunities to take part in field sports. The region is also well served for creative and rural crafts short breaks / training courses. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Development of high quality 'pack horse' style activity packages based on country house hotels and major walking / cycling routes
- ⇒ Development of water based holiday packages utilising major rivers in the region
- ⇒ Development of health related (well being / quality of life) 'stress busting' short breaks for specific London market segments
- ⇒ Promotion / marketing of the South East region as a premier walking and outdoor pursuits destination
- ⇒ Promotion and marketing of the South East region as a premier destination for fishing and shooting breaks.

The South East region contains a wealth of historic properties and large gardens as well as diverse cultural festivals and local events. This regional resource has the potential to attract greater numbers of staying visitors. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Encouraging greater networking between historic houses, heritage attractions, formal gardens and accommodation providers

Fostering rural tourism enterprises

• **Aim: to provide more focused business support for the tourism industry**

The rural tourism sector is made up of large numbers of small businesses, many of which lack specific skills and knowledge. Many are considering diversifying out of farming or land management into tourism for the first time. It is essential that good advice is available at reasonable cost to support such businesses. The Rural Task Force referred directly to the need for specialist advice to be made available to the tourism sector. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Preparing an audit of current skills training availability in the region, identifying gaps and future needs
- ⇒ Development of skills training package for rural tourism businesses
- ⇒ Improving the co-ordination of Business Links, the Farm Business Advisory Service and Rural Development Service and development of specialist advice available to the tourism industry and those considering diversification
- ⇒ Targeting sources of funding such as those under DEFRA's Vocational Training Scheme or the Rural Enterprise Scheme.



- **Aim: to provide additional regional planning advice on rural tourism**

Obtaining planning approval is often perceived as a potential barrier for many small entrepreneurs. DEFRA has recently launched a free planning advisory service for farmers and land managers, while the South East England Regional Assembly has established a Tourism Task Force to advise it on tourism issues relating to Regional Planning Guidance (RPG). Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Additional guidance on rural tourism to that contained in current RPG
- ⇒ Providing additional guidance to landowners and planning departments with regard to sustainable rural tourism development

- **Aim: to increase networking between rural tourism businesses**

Collaboration between businesses can be critical to the success of small rural businesses, including those engaged in tourism. Marketing consortia, the development of bulk purchasing arrangements and the simple exchange of best practice can transform businesses previously operating in isolation of each other. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Encouraging the development of local tourism consortia and tourism associations to increase the opportunities for local market research, co-ordinated promotion, bulk buying, sharing best practice and to strengthen representation of the local tourism industry in strategic forums

- **Aim: to improve the impact of tourism businesses on the environment and local community**

Rural tourism businesses depend to a major extent on the quality of the countryside around them and have a vested interest in the long-term health of both the built and natural environment. Yet many will not be aware of best practice or of the costs and benefits involved. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Promotion of the Green Audit Kit and the development of Environmental Accreditation Schemes
- ⇒ Monitoring and evaluation of the Isle of Wight Visitor Payback Project - A Gift to Nature - and other similar schemes
- ⇒ Promoting partnerships between the local community and local tourism fora and associations



Improving the management of rural destinations

- **Aim: to identify rural tourism destinations to demonstrate integrated quality management**

Integrated Quality Management (IQM) is relatively undeveloped in integrated land management, yet is potentially a highly relevant discipline. A proposed priority for action is to:

- ⇒ Work with AONBs and the two proposed National Parks in the South East region to establish IQM exemplars

- **Aim: to strengthen the tourism potential of market towns**

The Rural White Paper places market towns at the centre of its strategy to ensure widespread access to modern services across rural England. They have been seen as having the potential to serve as a new focal point for rural regeneration. Market towns also have a key role to play in tourism, both as service centres and as destinations in their own right. SEEDA already supports the Market Towns Initiative. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Working with the Market Towns co-ordinators to undertake tourism 'health checks', identifying strengths and weaknesses, and developing local tourism strategies and marketing plans
- ⇒ Developing the tourism product in line with these strategies - quality accommodation, pubs and restaurants, potential attractions - and links with the surrounding countryside
- ⇒ Providing skills training and expertise to develop business tourism and conference capabilities within market towns
- ⇒ Establishing joint marketing consortia between market towns regionally and more widely
- ⇒ Assisting with town twinning arrangements

The relationship of market towns to their surrounding countryside is important as they act as service centres for the surrounding area and contain a high proportion of the available tourist accommodation stock.





Special measures are also needed for the regeneration of the South East's coastal towns, all of which have suffered in recent years.

Although funding support may come from a variety of sources, the links between market towns and countryside, and seaside towns and their surrounding coast and countryside, are particularly strong and should be reflected in co-ordinated regeneration initiatives.

- **Aim: to improve visitor and transport management**

Transport is a fundamental issue affecting all forms of tourism, including tourism in rural areas. Transport planning is critical to any major drive to increase visitor numbers and impacts have to be thought through. Despite increasing efforts to encourage people to travel by other means, most visitors to rural areas do so by private car. This can cause congestion at certain times unless properly managed. There are no easy solutions. Key priorities for action include:

- ⇒ Working with Train Operating Companies (TOCs) in the region to develop further non-car based day visits and holiday packages
- ⇒ Encouraging TOCs and bus companies to provide for bicycle carriage, cycle racks and cycle hire
- ⇒ Encouraging the provision of better integrated transport services and readily available and widely promoted timetable information, including information of promotional fares and packages
- ⇒ Encouraging the provision of better, cleaner, more comfortable rolling stock and buses to improve the experience of the travelling public
- ⇒ Promotion / delivery of local cycle hire by rural accommodation providers
- ⇒ Continuing to monitor road and rail bottlenecks and seeking to overcome these through the Regional Transport Plan (RTP)
- ⇒ Development of integrated public transport schemes for visitor management, identifying opportunities for greater RTP funding
- ⇒ Promotion of best practice traffic management initiatives in both town and country, including e.g. the various 'Hopper Bus' projects and the Cuckmere Valley 'Tourism without Traffic' project
- ⇒ Practical guidance on Visitor Management Plans





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