

# “The ordinary paradise of the English countryside.”

→ England is a beautiful place to live and work – but are we doing enough to introduce tourists to a great national asset? In a timely piece as the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee runs an inquiry, **SARAH LEE** argues that there is much more we can do.



Burnham on Sea Food Festival is popular with locals and tourists alike

**T**he first thing to do when considering tourism and the countryside is to refrain from spouting poetry about our beautiful countryside – hard enough, especially if you are from Shakespeare’s Warwickshire, as I am. Instead we have to consider the issue on a practical level. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee recently launched an inquiry into the role tourism can play in supporting the rural economy, and we submitted our own thoughts into how best we can boost this vital sector.

Rural tourism itself underpins local economies, but it also contributes to our national economy, while supporting local farmers, producers and making the most of our country’s natural assets. The areas for growth include food and drink tourism, which can generate a year round tourism offer, and the opportunities shooting and fishing offer, which not only bolster local economies but enable people to engage in the natural environment.

As you will know from your own experience of the English countryside, there are plenty of challenges holding back this growth. Poor public transport and broadband are top of the list, but business regulations also impact negatively on small tourism businesses, and must be addressed.

Rural tourism, playing its fullest part in the international market, is a huge economic opportunity. The UK is the eighth most visited country in the world and people come to visit locations which have deep rooted connections with democracy, industry and the arts. Yet only around 17 per cent of visitors manage

to leave London and the major cities to visit the countryside. This is a missed opportunity both for visitors and for the rural tourism businesses losing out on potential income. Our own Rural Oscars have a tourism category to help promote the hard work and imagination that goes into rural tourism, and a cursory glance at social media shows how popular our countryside, its food, its villages and its people are around the world. The English countryside is photogenic and culturally important, but it is inaccessible to many – only 6 per cent of tourists use public transport to visit the countryside.

Rural tourism in England contributes at least £10 billion per year to the economy, making up a substantial part of the overall £73 billion value of tourism in England. It makes a significant contribution to the rural economy, supporting village shops and services, jobs and businesses, and it is crucial to ensuring the long-term sustainability of our countryside. The jobs which are supported by rural tourism – 380,000 in England alone – encourage people to live, work and bring up their families in these rural communities.

In areas such as West Somerset, particularly reliant on rural tourism, where a quarter of all jobs are in tourism. This is due in part to a good relationship between the private and public sectors, with the National Parks working well with local hostleries and activity enterprises. A further reason behind its success is the draw of country sports enthusiasts from here and abroad to participate in hunting, shooting and fishing in the counties of Devon and Somerset.

Country sports are not only part of Exmoor’s heritage, but, as our own research shows, they also account for 90 per cent of winter tourism in the area. This maintains employment in otherwise challenging circumstances and provides hotels, bed and breakfast establishments and pubs with vital income in the winter months. Indeed, many businesses would

not survive without this trade.

We must ensure that those who want to come to Britain as tourists are able to do so, and that we can ensure a minimum of bureaucracy so that the warm welcome, stunning scenery and world-class produce are what they remember most. ●

## Our recommendations for tourism in rural England

- Promote the natural environment and country sports as part of a tourism strategy to encourage more people, both from within the UK and abroad, to visit rural England for longer and year-round.
- Tailor support for farmers and rural residents to diversify into tourism and grow their businesses. Include support for innovation, training, marketing, funding advice, mentoring and networking.
- Review business regulations related to tourism ensuring they are proportionate and reduce red tape.
- Raise awareness of the benefits of buying local produce amongst visitors. A strong local food and drink offer can enhance the quality of the local tourism product.
- Promotion of specialist produce, e.g. game and cheese, should be at the heart of tourism strategies and promoted online through an interactive map.
- Improve broadband infrastructure and digital skills to ensure tourism businesses are making the most of the opportunities afforded by the digital world.
- Public transport must be integrated with tourism attractions in rural areas.

- The committee’s enquiry is about England only. The Countryside Alliance represents Wales, Ireland and Scotland, too.

“The ordinary paradise of the English countryside” is a quote taken from AS Byatt’s Ragnarok.



**Sarah Lee** is the Countryside Alliance’s head of policy and is also a director of the popular Countryside Alliance Awards, which boost rural businesses and communities.