



**THE WAY  
FORWARD FOR  
FARM TOURISM  
IN THE NORTH  
WEST**

**EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY**

**TO**

**NORTH WEST FARM  
TOURISM  
INITIATIVE**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Why Farm Tourism – Rationale for Support

Rural tourism features in the Tourism Strategy for England's Northwest and its significance to the sector is reinforced in NWDA's *Marketing the Natural Environment of the Northwest*, 2006, which states:

*'The Northwest has an outstanding natural environment with a justifiable claim to be the best in England. It also became apparent that there is considerable under utilization of the majority of natural assets for tourism and so scope for attracting more visitors, with appropriate visitor management'.*

Rural tourism also features strongly in the tourism strategies for Lancashire & Blackpool, Cheshire & Warrington and for Cumbria.

Outside of market towns and a small number of large land owners such as the National Trust, Forestry Commission and United Utilities, there are few commercial tourism businesses in the countryside other than farms.

Farms are custodians of the natural heritage and environment; the raw material that attracts visitors to the countryside. The rural 'public realm' is part of creating a sense of place. This includes development and management of footpaths, bridleways and trails. They have a key role to play in the visitor economy and delivering sense of place.

If the northwest wants to utilise the tourism potential of its natural assets and grow the rural visitor economy it requires product to do so. Visitors to the countryside need places to stay and things to see and do including all weather attractions. Farms are an essential part of delivering that countryside visitor experience though it is important they deliver what the visitor wants and that farm tourism businesses are integrated with the wider rural tourism support network and strategic thinking on rural matters.

Sustainability of rural tourism businesses is often marginal because of strong seasonality and the nature of visitor activity. Farms use tourism as one strand to their business so are able to run smaller scale tourism operations because they have other income sources. Equally, some mainstream farming activity is no longer profitable and so farmers are seeking new business opportunities. Tourism helps farms stay in business.

The work of the North West Farm Tourism Initiative (NWFTI) illustrates that farms need a support network to help develop their tourism potential. So support for farm tourism enables countryside tourism to flourish.

However farm tourism should not be supported in isolation of other countryside initiatives, rather specific needs of farm tourism businesses should be recognised and met within future structures. The recommendations of this report suggest how this might be achieved.

## **Achievements of the North West Farm Tourism Initiative**

The review identified several strengths in the NWFTI activities and in its approach, that add value to other initiatives, projects and programmes. These strengths influence priorities for the future and are:

- Delivery of specialist in-depth business advice by advisors with an understanding of the particular needs of the tourism and farming sectors.
- The NWFTI has been strongly underpinned by quality of service to businesses, marketing activity and in supporting quality in the business
- Developing networks between strategic partners and between businesses. Business clusters strengthen the farm contribution to rural tourism – clusters are particularly important for business confidence and sustainability because of the frequently remote location of farms and the nature of the farming industry.

Underpinning the approach of the Initiative has been a recognition that farm tourism businesses are not start-ups, they already run complex business operations. As such, their business needs are largely about developing tourism related skills not about generic business skills.

## **Recommendations**

Three main areas of activity are recommended specifically working with farm tourism businesses. All three areas can be linked up with other rural tourism work and partners should consider how they achieve this. At a minimum activity must link strategically and operationally with the tourism brands and priorities of the Regional Tourism Strategy and with the priorities and programmes of the RDPE. The three areas of activity are:

1. **Customised Business Advice for Farm Tourism Businesses** – including marketing and skills development and via workshops directed through business clusters. Delivery should be integrated within existing sub-regional rural business service provision.
2. **Cluster development** – building on success to date with product development and marketing activity and specifically:
  - developing the supply chain aspect of the clusters and making links with the food and drink sector cluster in particular
  - building stronger links between farm tourism clusters and wider rural tourism clusters, e.g. equine tourism, gardens, including exchanging best practice and involving farm tourism businesses in capacity building and better integrating them within the wider rural tourism economy
  - consolidating marketing activity with an emphasis on CRM and use of IT to increase marketing skills and encourage self reliance.

3. **Research** – this is a cross-cutting activity to inform the way forward and refine priorities. Two areas are recommended:
- *Market segmentation* – linked to regional activity
  - *Monitoring and evaluation* – of specific farm tourism projects with an emphasis on the qualitative aspects.

Within these activities there should be continued support and development of the NWFTI business website and investigation of methods of business support through electronic media. The Initiative should continue with a meeting forum of tourist boards and other partners to ensure ongoing exchange of ideas and identification of opportunities for collaborative working.

### **Delivery Model**

The initiative will remain opportunity led, so will not be restricted to particular rural geographical locations within the northwest.

The recommendation is for sub regional delivery (operational) set within a regional framework (strategic).

The framework for the initiative needs to be consistent across the northwest to ensure a joined up approach at a strategic level. This is a tourism initiative in a rural area. Therefore it is recommended that the Tourist Boards should be responsible for the co-ordination of the delivery of farm tourism business support. The tourist boards are best placed to perform this role because, as the organisations charged with delivering tourism services in each sub-region they have a holistic picture of the sector. They benefit from formal mechanisms of communication with each other and with other regional partners. They are well placed to forge links between farm tourism and natural tourism.

The work of the tourist boards is increasingly driven by the concept of the visitor economy and quality of place. This will help ensure that links are made between farm tourism, the RES, the northwest regional tourism strategy and the work of local authorities and national parks. Aligned to this is that it will also help ensure that the programmes and support offered to farmers is led by visitor economy needs and markets, which is critical to business sustainability.

Tourist boards may choose to sub-contract specific projects and businesses services to other bodies and to establish other partnership working delivery arrangements. Further consideration is needed on people resources required for delivery and how that will be achieved in each sub-region.