



DCMS Select Committee Inquiry into garden tourism: response to call for evidence

Date: May 2019

Description: An inquiry by the DCMS Select Committee, looking at how parks and gardens contribute to UK tourism, the economy and national heritage.

About us

Historic Houses represents the UK's largest collection of independently owned historic houses, castles and gardens. A key part of the appeal of many of the 1,650 historic places we represent are gardens and designed landscapes, in their own right or as part of an historic house estate. Many of the parks and gardens we represent are registered heritage assets and draw visitors from across the country and the world. Historic gardens represent a living heritage and a gateway to the past in the same way as families and communities living in historic houses do. These special gardens add to the unique appeal of Historic Houses places, ensuring they are successful tourism destinations; there are more than 26 million visits to Historic Houses places each year, which generate over £1 billion for the economy, and support more than 33,000 full time equivalent jobs.

Garden tourism is also a vital part of the sustainable future of many Historic Houses places, who reinvest the profits from opening their gardens into the maintenance and repair of a listed house and gardens; across the UK, Historic Houses places currently face an outstanding repair and maintenance bill of £1.38 billion.

The challenges that many Historic Houses places face in developing their gardens as tourism attractions are the same as other rural businesses; access to capital funding, increased access to reliable broadband and/or 4G, and issues with transport for the 'final mile' between a visitor attraction and the nearest public transport hub. Many of the gardens we represent also face issues in relation to planning permission and/or listed building consent for structures in gardens, which would enable them to improve the visitor offer in their garden by providing facilities such as cafes and events venues.

The more the Government can do to unleash the full potential of garden tourism, the more this vital part of our tourism industry will be able to grow and flourish – not only contributing to UK GDP and providing rural jobs and prosperity, but also supporting the communities and nationally important heritage assets associated with those gardens. From the monastic gardens of the first millennium to the ground breaking designs of our world class modern designers, our cultural heritage is embedded in the gardens of historic houses.

How can gardens across the UK be supported to attract visitors and to ensure their future sustainability?

In order to understand the way that gardens across the UK need to be supported to ensure their future sustainability, it is important to first understand how the rural economy has changed in recent years. Traditional forms of heritage tourism remain hugely popular; Historic Houses places welcomed over 26 million visitors last year. Gardens are often vital to

this appeal, or a reason for visiting in their own right. This popularity was highlighted in the response to the 2016 Capability Brown Festival, which saw over 453 events take place across the UK in that year alone. However, many of the historic houses, castles and gardens we represent have also been diversifying to ensure the heritage in their care remains economically viable. Across the UK, Historic Houses places face an outstanding repair and maintenance bill of £1.38 billion, which continues to grow, and so owners are increasingly finding new and innovative ways to make sure their houses and gardens can earn their keep, such as through running events and festivals, offering corporate hire and providing wedding venue facilities.

In order to ensure that both traditional tourism and relatively new ventures can flourish at historic gardens across the country, there are four key challenges where support from the Government could unleash growth potential. With such support not only would garden tourism grow and develop, but any additional revenue would help to support the repair and maintenance of the nationally important houses attached to those gardens.

1/ First and foremost, practical improvements to the tax framework are essential to help historic houses and gardens generate funding (from their own resources) to tackle the huge backlog of repair and maintenance these special places require. Having assessed a wide range of potential solutions to this conservation challenge, Historic Houses' evidence indicates that reforming Heritage Maintenance Funds (HMFs) would be the most cost-effective tool. HMFs enable nationally important (Grade I or II* or a registered park or garden, or the equivalent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) historic houses and gardens that are open to the public to ring-fence funds (from their own resources) for maintenance. In their current form however, with income tax on them levied at 45%, HMFs are not being used to their full potential – just 8% of the historic houses and gardens we represent have one in place. Independent economic research we commissioned in 2018 – carried out in accordance with the Treasury's Green Book stands – has concluded that reducing the income tax rate on HMFs to the basic rate of 20% would generate a net economic benefit for the UK economy of £85.5 million by 2023. This benefit derives from the additional tourism visits that would be carried out (because more houses and gardens would be open to the public), the additional maintenance and repair work that would be carried out, and the general enhancement to wellbeing that arises from greater public access to well looked-after heritage assets. We are working closely with government, politicians and stakeholders to highlight the benefits of reforming HMFs and would welcome the opportunity to brief the DCMS Select Committee on our proposal.

2/ There is a clear need for there to be more funding for the development of rural broadband, alongside better promotion of existing schemes. In order to successfully promote a historic property and garden, it is vital for tourism businesses to have access to fast, reliable broadband in order to run and maintain their websites, and to allow visitors to post about their visit while on site. Only 37% of Historic Houses places have sufficient access to 4G and fibre optic broadband. If this is not drastically improved, many rural communities will be left behind with the new 5G developments. We were delighted when the Government announced in the Tourism Action Plan that it was committed to ensuring that over 95% of the population would have access to superfast broadband speeds by the end of 2017, but we are concerned that a/ this target has not been met and b/ the funding available currently is not enough to connect the remaining five per cent.

3/ There is also the issue of the 'final mile', which refers to a lack of public transport options between the closest train station or airport and a tourism destination. While some Historic Houses places are large enough to be able to partner with local transport companies such as bus and taxi firms, others do not have the same resources. There is an opportunity here for Local Enterprise Partnerships, Destination Management Organisations and/or Local

Government to work together to tackle the issue of the 'final mile' in support of their local rural tourism businesses such as historic gardens.

4/ Finally, there is the issue of planning permission and/or listed building consent for temporary structures in gardens. Many Historic Houses places not only open their gardens for visitors, but also use them to offer summer season cafes, events venues and wedding facilities. This in turn increases not only the popularity of a venue, but also creates an additional revenue stream which supports the long-term sustainability of the historic garden and the historic house. While there are many Local Planning Authorities that understand this and work constructively with Historic Houses places to ensure that they are able to erect temporary structures that are sympathetic to the setting of the house and gardens, this constructive approach from Local Planning Authorities is by no means universal. By helping to promote best practice in this area, the Government could enable more historic gardens to open to visitors and be sustainable, thanks to the addition of temporary structures that promote their ongoing viability – such as a café, visitor centre or events space.

Case Study - Braxted Park

Braxted Park is a Historic Houses member in Essex. The main house is Grade II* listed, and the gardens include a Grade II listed walled garden. Braxted Park runs various businesses from the house and grounds, including a successful events business, the revenue from which helps to fund the repair and maintenance of the historic estate. Braxted also offers use of its facilities at a subsidised rate for local charities and community groups.

To enable the estate to make best use of the walled garden for events and weddings, Braxted Park had previously secured planning permission for a temporary structure (with two successive 7 year temporary permissions) in the Walled Garden; this had enabled them to offer events in a marquee in the walled garden for 14 years, providing much needed local employment, and enabling investment in the conservation of the walled garden; part of a wider £3 million conservation project for the estate as a whole, including restoration of the main house (ongoing) and outbuildings. The marquee has always been erected on a hard-surface tennis court, added to the walled garden in the 1960s. These planning permissions came with some conditions which were always adhered to.

In 2019, Braxted Park applied for permanent planning permission for this temporary structure (a marquee) in the walled garden. This was at the insistence of the local authority Planning Officers. It was first suggested that Braxted Park apply for planning permission and listed building consent for a permanent structure but Braxted Park declined, as they wanted to have the option to remove the structure in the future should the wedding business that they run cease to be profitable, or should the estate be sold. Furthermore, the potential costs of building a permanent structure would require such substantial capital investment that funds would be drawn away from the maintenance and repair of the listed house to service the associated finance costs; the wedding business was set up in the first place to increase estate revenue so that more could be invested in the repair and maintenance of the historic fabric.

Initially this application was rejected by Planning Officers, who argued that the potential harm to the listed walls of the garden was not out-weighed by the wide array of public benefits that result from the events business currently run from a temporary structure. The public benefits that have already resulted from the temporary planning permission are:

- 60 jobs on the estate, including 40 in the events business.
- Over £3m invested in the historic house and gardens over the last 10 years

- An ongoing maintenance bill of about £400,000 per year with work commissioned from local craftspeople and suppliers
- A direct events business spend in the district of about £800,000 per year
- 16,000 visitors to events in the walled garden, with 6000 of these spending money at local hotels and B&Bs
- Huge support of local charities
- A major increase in accessibility exemplified by the 5000 people from the district that came to the Maldon District Council Sense of Place Christmas Fayre, underwritten by Braxted Park in December.

The planning Councillors (members) rejected their Planning Officers' recommendation to refuse planning permission, instead granting full permanent permission with no conditions. The owner of Braxted Park provided data and photographs to demonstrate the significant restoration of the walled garden that resulted from their successful events business. They were also able to rely on testimony from Councillors who have seen at first-hand the conservation work that has been made possible thanks to surpluses from the events business. If the estate had been prevented from being economically viable, this investment would have stopped, and the continuation of the 30-year conservation project would have been compromised.