

PE1721/F

Petitioner submission of 3 December 2019

Response to the National Trust for Scotland press release 13/11/19

Introduction

The Friends of Geilston are disappointed at the tone of the recent press release on the future of Geilston Garden following the Board of Trustees meeting. This statement was issued on the same day that representatives of the NTS had met with the Friends. The tone of this meeting was positive, so it was particularly disappointing to then see the press statement which appears to diminish the value of Geilston in the minds of the public. This response examines the main areas of concern we have with this public statement and suggests alternative approaches that the NTS might wish to consider.

Financial position

The NTS statement continues to give prominence to annual losses: £111,000 in the last financial year, and to *“low visitor numbers - around 11,000 per year – of whom less than 10% pay for entry”*. These figures are misleading.

First, the losses appear to be based on historical figures and include £10,000 storage charges for artefacts from the house, which the NTS has indicated will never be open to the public. It would be helpful for all parties if the NTS provided figures for the current financial year and make projections that do not include additional costs that arise from lack of on-going maintenance of the house.

Second, the visitor figures for this year stand currently at 13,778, an increase of more than 20% that the NTS does not acknowledge (or celebrate). Third, as in previous press releases, no attempt is made to explain that 90% of the visitors to Geilston are NTS members, paying their annual subscriptions to the organisation, the consequences (and potential) of which are explored in the following section.

Alternative accounting for alienable properties

Geilston is one of the very few NTS properties that is alienable. The great majority are inalienable, supported by endowments and where these are insufficient (as in most cases), the NTS, to meet its legal obligations from acquisition, must use its own resources (reserves and membership income) to support the properties. There will be some properties that attract substantial numbers of single visits by non-members, but others like Geilston may not appeal in such a degree to the mass tourist market although still making a significant contribution.

The 10% of visitors to Geilston, or approximately 1,380 non NTS members, pay nearly £9000 on entry, assuming £6.50 adult entry charge (the mid-way figure between £5.50 for concessions and the adult entry charge of £7.50). But in addition, about 12,400 NTS members also visit the garden. Collectively, through their annual

subscriptions they contribute up to £744,000 in membership fees to the NTS. (This figure is based on £60 for adult membership: it is appreciated that there are different classes of membership that will probably reduce overall income but, nonetheless, the annual income to the NTS from members visiting Geilston is likely to be in the order of £500,000.)

This demonstrates that Geilston is an NTS members' garden and not simply a local, community asset as presented by the NTS in its press release. Rather it serves a wider audience, that of the West of Scotland and beyond (and it would be useful if the NTS had data on its visitors' profiles). These NTS member visitors generate substantial funds for the Trust and this support is may reduce if Geilston closes. This is why the NTS needs to re-evaluate how it accounts for its visitor numbers and income in those few properties like Geilston that are alienable. One system of accounting that fits all properties, whether they are alienable or not, is inappropriate.

In the case of Geilston, let us say that the 12,400 NTS member visitors are deemed to have paid a £6.50 entry charge out of their £60 membership fee. This would generate approximately £80,000 to add to the nearly £9000 from non-member visitors, substantially reducing the deficit (as currently presented by the NTS) or, putting it more positively, paying for the running costs of the garden. In addition, NTS members would still be contributing £53.50 each to support the organisation as a whole. Further, Geilston has a very good record for recruiting new members, again emphasising the close relationship between this garden and NTS members. The Friends of Geilston urge the Trustees of the NTS to review how members support alienable properties.

Community Trust

Two other points from the press release require to be clarified. The first is to refute the NTS claim that the Friends of Geilston "rejected" the community trust option. The Friends sought advice from Community Links Scotland (a government funded organisation that supports community enterprises and buy outs), the Community Planning and Development unit of Argyll and Bute Council, and from our lawyer, TC Young, all of whom cautioned against an acquisition on this scale. As an alternative we suggested in our submission to the EKOS study that a smaller scale incremental approach, in partnership with the NTS, might be more practicable.

Enabling Development

The second point, and related to the above, is that the Chief Executive of the NTS, Simon Skinner, has consistently indicated that the community trust route was his preferred option and, failing that, enabling development. Throughout the initial consultation process with the NTS in 2017-18 and the EKOS study of 2019 the Friends constantly requested that the NTS provide details of the number and types of house, their location and the financial return. Unfortunately, no specific information was forthcoming during this process. In that sense, the proposed appointment of a land agent to examine the potential of enabling development is welcome. However, the Friends have always been aware of the planning issues surrounding this proposal and also have reservations on whether sufficient funds could be raised from an acceptable scale of development. We are concerned if this option is seen to have

limited financial return in the short to medium term, the NTS will confirm the standing decision taken in 2016 to close Geilston. Parallel with the review of the potential of enabling development there needs to be closer examination of the more mixed and creative approaches as set out in the EKOS report commissioned by the NTS.

Consultation

The Friends of Geilston would welcome further discussions with the NTS on the above issues and are committed to working with the Trust to secure the long-term future of the garden.