

Speech: Michael Ellis' speech to the Historic Houses AGM

It is an absolute pleasure to be here today at the Annual General Meeting of Historic Houses. Please let me start by extending my sincere thanks for inviting me here to speak today.

Almost this time last year the Government's Heritage Statement recognised the crucial role of private owners as custodians of much of the UK's very special heritage, so I am delighted to be here today to thank you all for the extraordinary work that you do. Historic Houses does an excellent job of promoting and supporting historic buildings across the UK – and deserves its fine reputation.

As Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism, I am always heartened to see the passion and vigour our nation's heritage evokes. Wherever they are located, historic houses provide an important anchor to the evolution of this country, and a reminder of our past.

Since joining the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in January this year, I have been championing heritage and tourism across government. I was pleased to welcome Historic Houses as one of the members of my Heritage Council – a forum that brings together key players in the heritage sector with government departments to enable dialogue to drive progress in key policy areas affecting heritage.

Historic Houses is an active and energetic contributor to the Heritage Council, and I look forward to continuing to work together in 2019 to ensure that our much-loved heritage is able to thrive into the future. In fact, we have our second Heritage Council meeting tomorrow.

We in Government recognise that there are many more independently owned historic houses open to the public across the UK, than the 250 or so country houses looked after by colleagues at national charities such as the National Trust and English Heritage.

Without the passion, hard work and commitment of people like you, our heritage sector simply could not be the economic powerhouse and world-leading cultural asset it is today.

This country has an astonishing variety of buildings and places. They stimulate domestic tourism and attract millions of people to our shores which is vital to our social and economic development.

In 2016/17 an estimated 33 million, that is 74% of all adults, visited a heritage site and 80% of people think that local heritage makes their area a better place to live.

We all know that protecting our nation's heritage enhances our wellbeing and quality of life, improving the way places are perceived.

You are already welcoming over 26 million visits to your houses every year (a huge number; more than the total number of inbound visitors to the whole of Japan in 2016!), generating £1 billion in visitor spend and engaging with hundreds of thousands of education visitors in your local communities.

One year on from the Heritage Statement's commitment to keep tax incentives for repair and maintenance under review, I am grateful to your team at Historic Houses for the production of your new Green Book style evidence assessing the costs and benefits of reducing the income tax burden on Heritage Maintenance Funds.

I have advocated for robust evidence of the need to act and the benefit of doing so and the net economic benefit detailed within the proposal is compelling.

Recently, I visited Holdenby House to hear first-hand how reforming Maintenance Funds could help houses such as Holdenby to generate more funds from their own resources dedicated to the conservation of nationally important heritage open to the public.

I understand that your houses are facing a repair and maintenance backlog totalling approximately £1.38 billion, and that practical and cost-effective changes to the fiscal framework would be part of the solution to help you to address this.

Next week members of my team at DCMS will be joining Historic Houses to meet the Treasury to discuss Heritage Maintenance Funds; I look forward to the feedback from this meeting.

The powerful combination of culture, community and commerce that's replicated at Historic Houses places across the country creates vibrant places in which to live and work, invest or start up a business, learn and holiday; it is little wonder that in a recent Historic England survey members of the public voted for historic houses and castles as their most-valued part of the UK's historic environment.

If I could leave you all with only one message today, it would be this:

The whole of government recognises the central importance of heritage and the protection of historical buildings. Far from being a satellite within the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, there is universal acknowledgement in Whitehall that heritage matters.

This recognition of the importance of our country's heritage was reflected in the recent Autumn Budget Statement. We saw £55 million being allocated into heritage assets in high street areas to kick start regeneration.

This message will be heard far and wide across the country: heritage will always matter.

And as we prepare for the UK's exit from the European Union, heritage can help us forge a new relationship with the rest of the world.

The world knows and loves us for our great palaces; our ancient churches and our eclectic styles of architecture. This shared heritage is the inheritance of all UK subjects. It binds us together and reminds us that we are part of an on-going story.