

DISCUSSION NOTE: LONGER TERM DEVELOPMENT OF GPOW

It is hard to overstate the importance of HLF's Grants for Places of Worship (GPOW) programme in supporting historic places of worship, a vital aspect of our cultural and social heritage.

In its various manifestations, the scheme has played a key part in ensuring that the voluntary groups (mainly congregations) who look after these buildings have been able, year on year, to do what is necessary to keep them in good repair and accessible to anyone and everyone.

This discussion note, developed to coincide with HLF's review of its strategic framework, outlines a variety of ways in which the GPOW scheme might be developed to meet future needs.

This discussion note, produced by the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance (HRBA), deals only with GPOW. The HRBA's parent body, the Heritage Alliance, looks forward to engaging with you on some of the broader questions relating to your future strategy, and will be responding to the DCMS's call for evidence.

HRBA

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1. Community outcome

Background

As an outcome from a GPOW investment, HLF wishes that 'more people and a wider range of people will have engaged with heritage'. This is the only community outcome applicable to GPOW.

We appreciate the thinking that lies behind this outcome. Like other forms of built heritage, religious buildings have an important role to play in individual, social and commercial wellbeing.

In this context, we would value the opportunity to discuss three particular aspects of the community outcome.

Sustainability skills

We think it would be beneficial to place more emphasis within GPOW on the acquisition of skills required for sustaining the building after the project has been completed. For example, these could be skills in improving the visitor experience, or managing routine maintenance or widening the supporter base. We believe that, in appropriate cases, further promotion of HLF investment in this sort of training would provide real value for money.

This could be achieved by allowing training in these areas to be included (if the applicant wished) within the community engagement activities (see 4. below).

Assessing the existing outcome

In support of the current outcome, the GPOW application process seeks an incremental increase in the number of people who will in future engage with the building, using current numbers as a baseline.

We think this incremental approach underplays the fact that GPOW investments are often the major factor in keeping the building accessible for future generations. There are a significant number of cases where a historic place of worship would definitely have been closed without the GPOW grant, and in almost all other cases the risk of future closure has been substantially reduced.

Thus, of itself the act of keeping a building in good repair and open for business via a GPOW investment means that many more people can and will engage with the heritage over the following decades than would otherwise have done so, because GPOW has allowed closure to be forestalled. This is a major difference from some other types of investment made by HLF. We think therefore that it would be helpful if the assessment of this outcome took this into account.

Choice of outcome

The above outcome focuses (conceptually at least) on the number of identifiable people entering and engaging with the building.

We believe this may sometimes disadvantage worthy projects where this outcome is simply not applicable, even in theory. For instance, it would not allow GPOW to help create a great place for everyone to enjoy, or to help with regeneration. A different community outcome might be relevant to such projects: for example, the outcome ‘a better place to live, work or visit’ might sometimes be more relevant than ‘more people and a wider range of people will have engaged with heritage’.

It might therefore be beneficial if the GPOW scheme allowed an alternative community outcome to be selected by the applicant as appropriate.

2. Partnering in selection of buildings

We appreciate and strongly support the value placed by HLF on responding to local concerns and desires, and relying on applicants to step forward and make their case. It is an important incentive for congregations to know that they can apply for GPOW funding without having to be on someone else’s list of preferred applicants, and to know that their application will be judged solely on its merits.

We would wish to maintain this important dynamic.

However religious heritage assets have one unusual characteristic, in that the capacity of the congregation to care for the asset is unrelated to the importance of the asset. This is in contrast with many other forms of heritage, where the more important the heritage, the more easily it attracts people to support it. Hugely important religious buildings may have congregations which do not have the capacity to make the case for GPOW investment.

Thus in order to take a long term perspective about the importance of the heritage asset, and allocate public money accordingly, it is important not to rely too heavily on an application

system which is partly driven by today's congregational capacity. Not least, there are many examples of congregational capacity increasing after a period at a low ebb, with a positive effect on the long-term sustainability of the building.

We therefore believe there is room for HLF to work with knowledgeable partners in promoting buildings worthy of consideration of investment through the GPOW scheme, doing so in a way which does not allow top-down strategy to trump the needs of individual buildings. We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this with you.

3. Volunteer model and role of third parties

We suspect that many applications for HLF funding for major building work are developed and written by paid staff (for example, for building projects in the museum sector). These paid staff make the application, then run the subsequent building project.

In contrast we believe that the majority of GPOW applications and projects are developed, managed and driven through by volunteers, usually doing this sort of work for the first and only time.

One particular difficulty with this model is widely recognised: some places of worship have congregations who are quite capable of keeping the building ticking over, but will never have the capacity to apply to GPOW or manage a project.

But more generally we would argue that, although voluntary engagement with a project is important, *it does not follow that volunteers should necessarily do all the work*. We would argue for example that volunteers do not need to learn project management skills, any more than they are expected to learn stone masonry. Indeed, given the infrequency with which any individual place of worship has a major project (typically once every few decades) the acquisition of such skills by these volunteers would seem to be pointless, unless they wish to acquire them as part of their personal development.

We believe too that the burden of time commitment and worry currently expected of volunteers would sometimes more appropriately be shouldered by professionals.

In summary, we think that in some cases the model of the volunteer doing all the work is not the most appropriate approach. We appreciate that the GPOW scheme can provide funding for development costs. But we believe there is a case for HLF to be more proactive – explicitly to accept and then shape the ‘professionalisation’ of GPOW applications and project management where appropriate.

So we would encourage HLF to explore alternatives involving third parties. For example, HLF might develop and work with regional and national networks of expertise in order to support local congregations. Or it might invest in third-party capacity building, perhaps encouraging the development of a market place of professional helpers, or of a volunteer base of experienced practitioners or of a mentoring scheme drawn from those who have already been through the process.

4. Engagement with heritage

We appreciate the emphasis placed by GPOW on activities that help engage people with the heritage of the place of worship.

However, we would encourage HLF to reconsider some aspects of how this requirement is handled. First, there is, we believe, a bare minimum of engagement, which should be insisted on. For example, for Church of England churches this might be updating the Church Heritage Record.

Beyond that we think that there could usefully be more emphasis on ‘building on what you have already got’, and more detailed guidance provided on the levels and types of engagement which might be appropriate in different situations, integrating with the project as appropriate.

Finally the current process appears not to take account of what is already being done to engage people with the heritage of the place of worship. As a result we fear that quite often the requirement for additional activity is hitting the law of diminishing returns, and public money and volunteer time may sometimes be spent on activities of marginal utility. We would encourage HLF to consider on a case by case basis how much additional community engagement is cost effective.

5. New capital works

HLF’s approach to funding new capital works is that: ‘We will only fund new works if you can demonstrate that they are necessary to encourage more people to visit and use your place of worship. We will not fund new works that are intended to only benefit the existing congregation *and other users*’ (our emphasis).

This approach takes a ‘private visitor attraction’ model of the heritage asset, where some people own the asset and other people visit it and may engage at a deeper level; understandably, in this case it is the visitor group which HLF would wish to grow by funding new works.

But this is not the right way to think about Places of Worship, which are only secondarily visitor attractions, and are primarily meeting places for a wide range of groups (e.g. mother and toddler groups, debt counselling, food banks, concerts etc). Many of these groups are voluntary. It is these user groups which currently support the building.

Existing groups need constantly to renew themselves, and having a usable building is an important component of their long term ability to attract new members and retain current ones. Some of these groups have particular physical needs, and many may need to meet all through the year. If existing groups fade away the future of the building is put at risk.

Thus HLF’s approach greatly weakens the future sustainability of the building, by ignoring the needs of those currently supporting it. All the weight of a decision whether HLF will support new works is to be placed on hoped-for new people, completely ignoring present users.

Indeed, the approach could be seen as penalising success: the more successfully a community is already engaged with the building before the GPOW application is made, the less willing HLF is to take account of the future needs of those community members when using the building in deciding whether to fund capital projects.

It seems to us that providing for the requirements of existing users is good custodianship. Providing facilities for a renewable stakeholder base can be transformative, but investment in new works should also take full account of the needs of existing stakeholder groups, and we hope HLF will feel able to reconsider its views on this matter.

6. Lessons from the Roof Fund

We understand that the HLF is carrying out a review of the Listed Places of Worship Roof Repair Fund.

Work carried out by Trevor Cooper on behalf of the Government's English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review has highlighted the very large number of applicants to that Fund. His paper also points out that the Roof Fund was making grants which were considerably smaller than the investments typically made by GPOW, and suggests that the size of GPOW grant has grown significantly in real terms in recent years. The paper speculates that to some extent a different though overlapping constituency was applying for roof repair grants than is applying for GPOW grants.

We would value the opportunity to discuss with you whether there is a case for some of the HLF investment carried out under the GPOW banner to be allocated using criteria closer to those used by the Roof Fund.

7. Big Lottery Fund

We would encourage HLF to liaise with the Big Lottery Fund to explore how GPOW and other HLF grants can best complement the grants provided by the Big Lottery for community buildings.

We have a number of specific ideas, and would value the opportunity to discuss these with HLF.