



Inspiring everyone to grow

RHS Gardens Wisley  
Wisley Lane  
Woking  
Surrey GU23 6QB

The Planning Inspectorate  
The Square, Temple Quay  
Room 3 O/P, Temple Quay House, 2  
Bristol  
BS1 6PN

10 July 2020

Dear Planning Inspectorate,

## **RHS Garden Wisley and M25 Junction 10**

The many representations that have been submitted to the Examining Authority by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) since November 2019 will be familiar to you. This letter will not go over the points made by other experts, but focusses on the cumulative impacts that amount to an existential threat to the RHS and its surroundings.

I became Director General of the RHS, the UK's leading gardening and environmental charity, in August 2010. This followed 25 years at Kuoni Travel as the UK Managing Director with responsibility for generating an annual turnover of £380m. My expertise is in the leadership, financial management and efficiency of destination organisations.

Since 2010, the RHS has substantially improved its financial position as evidenced by our published accounts. As a result we have been able to embark on major projects, including an entirely new 154 acre garden in Salford opening in 2021, using our expertise from our flagship Wisley and our other three gardens. My knowledge of our business model is thorough and detailed.

### **Operational Damage of the Highways England Scheme**

RHS Garden Wisley is renowned throughout the world for its horticulture, vital gardening science research, community engagement, wellbeing, enjoyment and beauty. It is the home of gardening for our nation of 27 million gardeners and for our country's £24 billion horticulture industry. However, because of the Highways England scheme it is now under serious threat of immediate substantial damage and long-term decline:

1. **Environmentally** – widespread and serious impacts will be inflicted with permanently increased travel miles and time delays, pollution and noise, as well as years of roadworks disruption.
2. **To our Community** – from increased traffic through Ripley, on the local road network, and with as yet unknown consequences from the Wisley Airfield planning application and its access onto the new Wisley Lane.
3. **Commercially** – there will be a direct negative impact on our visitor numbers, retail and catering income, and our crucial membership income that is vital to run our charitable work in science, education and community outreach. Such commercial damage will also jeopardise our ability to complete our Strategic Investment Programme for the benefit of horticulture.
4. **On our heritage** – if the Highways England scheme is implemented our ability to maintain this world class garden's standards will be diminished or ultimately destroyed.
5. **On our charitable delivery** - the Society will need to stop some of our current charitable activities such as apprenticeships, outreach work and environmental research to divert more funds from its core activities to support Wisley's impacted performance.

This is a perfect storm that will, we believe, start a downward financial spiral starting with reduced visitors due to declining appeal, leading to reduced trading, leading to a reducing ability to maintain our standards, and ultimately a poorer offer.

This DCO process commenced in 2016. From the outset Highways England have been aware of our 2013-2023 £72m Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) at Wisley and the risks to our financial position as a result of their scheme. Historic England have agreed by advising Highways England that the gardens viability may be at risk.

Had we been aware of this scheme in 2013 we would not have embarked on major investments at Wisley as our return on investment would have been insufficient for our Trustees to approve such a major investment. The DCO scheme will without doubt damage the RHS Garden unnecessarily as our Alternative Scheme mitigates against the resulting damage.

### **Improved Access to RHS Wisley**

This is the promise made in public documentation by Highways England as an early Scheme Aim. It was a crucial component of the scheme to recover our visitorship and finances from the inevitable disruption of construction.

The Chief Executive of Highways England then visited me at the garden on 8 September 2017 and undertook to protect the line of redwood trees that make up our garden boundary with the A3 from a noise, pollution and visual perspective. He also agreed to provide a specially enhanced bridge approach to the garden. We are now almost three years later being presented with a crude flyover entrance to our historic garden that has still not been designed in any detail, and is merely a concept without any of the promised special architectural or green features to reflect the importance of Wisley. In addition we find in these final stages of the DCO that there are more important trees at risk than identified before, and the very same redwoods are at risk once again (despite their repeated assurances to the contrary which we conveyed to our half million members). This is a shock to us and I suspect a future embarrassment to Highways England.

None of these promises have been met. We are instead faced with three unacceptable elements in the DCO scheme, all of which will spoil the garden and deter our visitors, in addition to the additional mileage, time and circuitous route of this scheme for RHS visitors. This will be further exacerbated if the Wisley Airfield housing development goes ahead and uses this same proposed road system.

We are surprised and concerned that this national infrastructure project lacks such crucial detail, and also disappointed how much resource in time and charitable funds we have needed to expend to demonstrate and correct the design process, and above all protect our garden.

The current DCO scheme for the RHS definitely does not “improve the access to RHS Wisley”. An opportunity and positive outcome for all will be lost if the RHS Alternative Scheme is not chosen.

### **Financial Impacts – An Existential Threat to the RHS**

The RHS garden is not profit making, and we are not funded by Government as for example Kew is. It generates losses that are supported by other RHS activities such as the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Our business plan for the Strategic Investment Programme (SIP) depends on the growth of visitors to fund such high investments.

However, our expert analysis shows that the construction period alone will reduce our charity's income by £6.6m from 450,000 fewer visitors. Over the construction period and ten years after, the cumulative impact is a loss of 1.1m visits and £19.2 million income to our charity, a loss that will be felt far and wide.

This is a major risk that will require me now to urgently discuss with our Trustees the savings we would have to make if we are to have a sustainable future for our charity such as:

1. Plan for a downward spiral of finances from reduced visitors leading to less membership income, retail trading, and customer service, with fewer employment opportunities meaning less local jobs and apprenticeships available instead of the planned for increases.
2. Cut maintenance and improvement of the heritage assets, both building and live collections, at a time when our maintenance liabilities are increasing with new projects.
3. Reduce scientific research into changing climate, pests and diseases and environmental issues, affecting our new Centre for Horticultural Science and Learning.
4. Reduce our charitable delivery of apprenticeship and student schemes to help solve this country's green skills crisis.
5. Reduce our community outreach work with local schools and diverse communities
6. By necessity, reduce our world class horticultural standards to the detriment of the nation's 27m gardeners and the £24bn horticultural industry.

Covid has already cost the RHS an estimated loss of £18m and that may yet increase. The RHS estimate that recovery from Covid will take at least three years in addition to all of the above.

### **The RHS Alternative Scheme - An Environmentally Better Solution**

The RHS Alternative Scheme is a better scheme. It is well documented that it improves socio-economic impacts, local communities, traffic management, RHS Wisley and – crucially for all of us - the environment. The addition of the south-facing slips and retention of the safe Wisley Lane north-turn are straightforward adjustments benefitting the entire M25 Junction 10 scheme aims that we otherwise support.

I call, on behalf of the RHS Trustees, on the Examining Authority and the Secretary of State to:

- Reject the current DCO scheme based on the comprehensive and compelling evidence put forward by all our experts, and
- Adopt the RHS Alternative Scheme as part of a new DCO process linked to the Local Plan and wider economic benefits.

Yours faithfully



Sue Biggs  
**Director General**