

Hello Everyone,

As you know Gary has been involved with the rights of second-home owners and the restriction of their visits. He hopes the article below will be of interest to those of you with second homes here in France.

He said: "We have had a lot of press coverage about this issue and politicians are listening! There is an article about AFA in this issue of Connexion".

French Senator fights for British second-home owner rights post Brexit

Senator Corinne Imbert thinks Britons who bought property before Brexit should not be restricted to visits of less than 90 days in 180 like other non-EU citizens

By George Kazolias

A senator is pressing for a special status for Britons who own holiday homes in France so they can stay in them for extended periods of up to half the year, as they used to before Brexit.

British visitors are now subject to ordinary non-EU citizen rules and restricted to 90 days in every 180 days in the Schengen area unless they apply for a visa.

Senator Corinne Imbert (Les Républicains), from Charente-Maritime, asked the Foreign Affairs Ministry in 2020 to grant a special status for Britons likely to suffer from the restrictions as many were used to longer stays, "traditionally between spring and autumn".

Her request was rejected, with the government saying that the 90-day rule is simply "an automatic effect of the British people's choice to leave the EU" - but she has not given up.

Referring to the fact that Britons must now undertake a complex visa process for a long stay, Mrs Imbert, who recently played a key role in adoption law reforms, said she plans to approach the new European and Foreign Affairs Minister about it after the presidential election.

She said that she would ask for "a special status for Britons with second homes in France to be able to visit without delay and without administrative constraints".

Visa process now 'tortuous'

One Briton who has owned a second home in Charente-Maritime for 17 years, retired policeman John Rouse, 66, told of the "tortuous" process of applying for a temporary long-stay visa. This is now the only option for a stay beyond three months.

He and wife Veronica applied online, then visited the London centre of contractor TLS Contact, a three-hour return journey. He will also have to return to collect their passports, because the option of courier delivery is currently unavailable.

"You have to collect a lot of paperwork, including documents to show you have enough money for the stay," he said.

"And we needed two sets of identical documents because there are two of us. I took around 100 photocopied pages.

"The place was crammed. We were there three hours. We paid around £225 in fees."

They will have to repeat this next year, if necessary.

"We've been going backwards and forwards for 17 years and now it's cost me two days to go to London and the best part of £300 to do exactly what we did for nothing and without any problems. I'm not a fan of Brexit," Mr Rouse said.

The Withdrawal Agreement protected the rights of Britons who are residents in France, but did nothing to conserve the status quo on visiting rights for those whose main home is in the UK.

There is no precedent for a special exception for long visa-free visits for a 'third country' state's visitors.

Senator says Britons have helped regenerate her area

Mr Rouse said their French home was a "derelict cowshed" when they bought it. "We converted it into a three-bedroom home." They have been using it regularly since 2006.

"Up until January of last year, we travelled freely in the way that suited us," he said.

National statistics body Insee says Britons own some 86,000 second homes in France - twice as many as other foreign non-residents, such as Belgians, Swiss or Italians. In parts of the south west or north west, also popular with British residents, they own 17% of all second homes. Before Covid, the British were France's number one visitors, as tourists or second-home owners. In 2018, they accounted for 14% of overnight stays for a total of 19 million nights.

Mrs Imbert said she sees British people every day in Nouvelle-Aquitaine who have "contributed to restoration, the economy and cultural life".

She believes Britons' historic links with France are an argument in their favour, though she added: "Granting special status to the British could create jurisprudence and other nationalities would demand the same rights. That could be the handicap to our request." However, the unique situation of Brexit might play a part. Call for less rigid system

Gary Coleby, president of the Association Franco-Anglaise (AFA), which promotes good relations between the English-speaking and French community in Charente-Maritime, said: "Previously, if you stayed for more than 180 days [per calendar year] you had to register for tax, but nobody really checked. The 180 days wasn't really an issue."

The AFA is urging the French government to enable second-home owners to visit their homes as and when they wish for up to 180 days in a year.

If that still means needing a visa, that would be acceptable if it was a new "unbureaucratic" kind, he said. At the very least, it should be possible for those who bought their second homes before Brexit, AFA suggests.

Mr Coleby added: "Brits in France are good citizens. They spend money, pay taxes, obey rules and buy old houses which they renovate, increasing the value and quality.

"Now second-home owners are paying taxes on houses they can't use." Mr Rouse said: "The problem is that in order to service and maintain a French house, it needs to be used. It needs to have people living in it, otherwise it deteriorates." He said he will not rent out his second home because of fears over non-paying tenants and difficulties expelling people in such circumstances. "If you're staying in France for up to six months, there is really no reason to rent out." The system worked well, he said, pointing out that, as second-home owners, they pay more local property tax than main-home owners do. "It is something they could easily fix. We do our bit. Even though we are not full-time residents, we feel partially French. I don't see why it would be difficult to integrate us into a more inclusive system."