

Supporting Statement of Agricultural Need

Extension to Existing Heat Pump Building – Sheeplands Farm

1. Introduction

This Supporting Statement of Agricultural Need accompanies a Prior Approval application submitted to Wokingham Borough Council for a proposed extension to an existing heat pump building at Sheeplands Farm.

The proposal constitutes development that is reasonably necessary for the purposes of agriculture, directly supporting the operation of an established commercial berry-growing enterprise and the continued use of existing agricultural polytunnels.

2. The Agricultural Holding and Existing Operations

Sheeplands Farm is a well-established agricultural holding comprising approximately 73 hectares of commercial berry production, the majority of which is grown within polytunnels. The business supplies major UK supermarket customers and operates on a seasonal production model that requires controlled growing environments to ensure crop quality, yield and continuity of supply.

In 2020, an 11-hectare block of strawberry polytunnels known as the “River Fields” was converted from unheated to heated polytunnels. These fields are located adjacent to the River Loddon and were specifically selected for integration into a renewable heating system.

To support this operation, the farm installed an 8.8MW water-source heat pump system, comprising:

- A river pumphouse extracting water from the River Loddon; and
- A dedicated plant barn housing five water-source heat pumps.

The system uses river water to generate a temperature uplift which is distributed to the polytunnels, allowing strawberries to be grown from April through to early December. This significantly extends the UK strawberry season and enables the farm to supply British-grown strawberries for up to eight months of the year, reducing reliance on imported produce.

3. Recent Expansion of Heated Growing Area

Since the original installation, an additional River Field has been connected to the heating network, increasing the total heated area from 11 hectares to approximately 15 hectares of polytunnel strawberries.

This expansion has materially increased the heat demand placed on the system. The existing five heat pumps no longer provide sufficient capacity to reliably heat the enlarged growing area during colder periods at the beginning and end of the season.

4. Need for Additional Heat Pumps and Building Extension

To maintain consistent growing conditions across the expanded heated polytunnel area, it is now necessary to install two additional water-source heat pumps within the existing heating system.

The current heat pump barn was designed to accommodate only the original five units and does not have sufficient internal space to house the additional equipment while maintaining safe access, servicing clearances and operational efficiency.

As a result, a small extension to the existing heat pump building is required solely to accommodate the additional agricultural plant.

5. Proposed Development

The proposal comprises a modest extension to the existing heat pump building, physically attached and functionally integrated with the current structure.

Specification of the extension:

- Footprint: 10.0m x 11.09m
- Three external walls (north, east and west), with the south elevation attached to the existing building
- Two roller shutter doors on the north elevation, each 3.0m wide, to allow plant installation and maintenance access

The extended building will be used exclusively for agricultural purposes, namely housing two additional water-source heat pumps forming part of the farm's renewable heating infrastructure.

6. Agricultural Need and Functional Justification

The proposed extension is reasonably necessary for the continued operation and viability of the agricultural holding. Specifically, it is required to:

- Provide sufficient heating capacity for the expanded 15-hectare heated strawberry polytunnel area
- Maintain consistent temperatures essential for early- and late-season strawberry production
- Support the farm's ability to supply UK-grown strawberries to supermarket customers from April through to early December
- Protect essential plant and equipment within an enclosed structure, ensuring reliability, longevity and safe operation

The development represents a logical and proportionate extension of existing agricultural infrastructure, directly linked to the established use of the land and the operational needs of the holding.

7. Conclusion

The proposed extension to the existing heat pump building at Sheeplands Farm is fully justified by clear and demonstrable agricultural need. It is required to accommodate additional heat pump units that are essential to heating an expanded area of polytunnel strawberry production and enabling the continued supply of British-grown fruit over an extended season.

The development is appropriately scaled, functionally necessary, and wholly related to agricultural use. It accords with the intent and principles of agricultural permitted development and should therefore be supported under the Prior Approval process.