



September 2024

Erection of 5no. Polytunnels (Retrospective) Supporting Agricultural Appraisal

At
**Manor Farm
Finchampstead
Wokingham
Berkshire
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1 Introduction

- 1.1 Reading Agricultural Consultants Ltd (RAC) is instructed by Mr S Slavchev, Managing Director of EU Plants Ltd to provide a supporting appraisal for the erection of 5no. polytunnels (retrospective) to support an existing soft fruits business located Manor Farm, Finchampstead, Wokingham, Berkshire.

2 Background

- 2.1 Manor Farm is an established agricultural holding which extends to approximately 36.3 hectares (90 acres). The business propagates soft fruit plants for supply to commercial fruit growers in the UK and Europe.
- 2.2 Permission was most recently granted under planning application 191112 (approved October 2019) for the retrospective siting of a block of 25 polytunnels and a further approval to allow year round polythene sheeting under 201428.
- 2.3 The applicant seeks to have the same year round sheeting allowance on these proposed (retrospective) block of 5 polytunnels which were erected in September 2024.
- 2.4 Photographs taken by the applicant in September 2024 of the 5 polytunnels subject to this application against those polytunnels in the 2019 approval are included below:







3 Planning Policy

3.1 Paragraph 11 of the NPPF sets out the core land-use planning principles that should be adopted and these expressly include:

- A presumption in favour of sustainable development;
- Positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of the area and be sufficiently flexible to adapt to rapid change;
- Provide for objectively assessed needs for housing and other uses;
- Approving development proposals that accord with an up-to-date development plan without delay; and,
- Where there are no relevant development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out-of-date, granting permission.

3.2 Paragraph 38 requires that decision makers:

- should approach decisions on proposed development in a positive and creative way;
- work proactively with applicants to secure developments that will improve the economic, social and environmental conditions of the area;
- seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible.

3.3 Section 6 of the NPPF is concerned with 'Building a strong, competitive economy' and at paragraph 85 it notes:

"planning policies and decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt..."

3.4 At paragraph 88 'Supporting a prosperous rural economy' it notes:

"Planning policies and decisions should enable:

- a) *The sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and well-designed new buildings;*
- b) *The development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based businesses;...”*

3.5 The Wokingham Borough Core Strategy (adopted January 2010) Policy CP11 – Proposals outside Development Limits (including countryside) states:

“In order to protect the separate identity of settlements and maintain the quality of the environment, proposals outside of development limits will not normally be permitted except where:

- 1. *It contributes to diverse and sustainable rural enterprises within the borough, or in the case of other countryside based enterprises and activities, it contributes and/or promotes recreation in, and enjoyment of, the countryside; and*
- 2. *It does not lead to excessive encroachment or expansion of development away from the original buildings; and ...”*

4 Appraisal

- 4.1 Approximately 90% of the holding at Manor Farm is in productive agricultural use for propagation and growing of soft fruit plants with the remainder of the land area comprising tracks, polytunnels, agricultural buildings, accommodation and irrigation reservoir.
- 4.2 The proposed development comprises the retrospective erection of a block of 5 polytunnels for the propagation of raspberry plants located in the northern area of the farm holding adjacent to the polytunnels approved under 191112, immediately to the south of Jubilee Road. The area has been used to the growing of blueberries however the applicant is increasing the production of raspberries on site.
- 4.3 In addition, the provision of a covered cropping area will allow the applicant to produce a supply of British grown raspberries a month earlier than the typical outdoor harvest. This means that raspberries will be ready for harvest in June each year, rather than July.
- 4.4 The polytunnels are each 7.7m wide and range between 93m to 114m in length with a maximum height of 3m. The total length of polytunnels erected currently erected at the site is 3.39km within 2.41 hectares of land.
- 4.5 The demand for UK fruit production was first highlighted in the Brexit preparation by EU Plants’ for customers which saw growing contracts being transferred from European growers to EU Plants and other UK based horticultural producers.

- 4.6 This has required EU Plants to grow for longer periods and introduce different crops and varieties to meet the demand of the customers/distributors and shopping habits of the general public.
- 4.7 Since the UK withdrew from the European Union; EU Plants has continued to adapt the business model whilst allowing for maximum flexibility.
- 4.8 The impact of Covid-19 highlighted the need for the ability to cover the frames year round to extend the growing and harvesting seasons and there continues to be an ever increasing demand for UK fruit production.
- 4.9 Demand for British grown soft fruit had been unprecedented throughout Covid-19 and post Covid 19 and the reduced import of soft fruit and the continuing benefits of field to fork as noted by DEFRA.
- 4.10 Manor Farm currently comprises a total of 5.06 hectares of polytunnels on the 36.3 hectare site (13.9%) and this retrospective application sees an increase of 0.21 hectares of polytunnels or 0.57% of the land holding.
- 4.11 The applicant considers that this ratio allows optimum production on the farm.
- 4.12 The proposed polytunnels are required to meet expanding commercial customer orders and contracts. The additional capacity will allow the applicant to meet the increased demand by providing controlled growing conditions which are required for the highly specialised commercial plant propagation enterprise.
- 4.13 The polytunnels are of typical design which has previously been accepted by the Council in applications F/2011/2620, 160643, 161194 and 191112.
- 4.14 The 5 polytunnels are laid out in a block covering 0.21 hectares on the northern boundary of the farm holding.
- 4.15 The polytunnel frames comprise a series of metal hoops slotted into metal legs which are screwed into the ground. The frames will be typically covered with polythene from January to June annually, dependent on weather conditions, however it is vital that the applicant is able to react to weather conditions and customer requirements and therefore the permission should not be limited with a time condition.
- 4.16 The polytunnels are located in an existing open field and there will be no impact on existing boundary trees and hedgerows.
- 4.17 The polytunnels can be accessed via existing farm tracks.
- 4.18 The scheme complies with the first and second criteria of Policy CP11 through contributing to a rural enterprise, as has been the case with the previous applications for polytunnels on the site,

and not leading to excessive encroachment into the countryside. EU Plants is an established agricultural business in a rural area which is growing to meet the demand of its customers.

5 Summary

- 5.1 The land is in use for an agricultural trade or business, known as EU Plants Ltd. The 5 additional retrospective polytunnels are required to allow the enterprise to continue growing and meet the increased customer demand. The plant husbandry requirements of the enterprise require the controlled growing environment provided by polytunnels.
- 5.2 The scale of the proposed development results in an area of 0.57% covered by polytunnels on the land holding. This will result in a total of 13.9% of the land holding being used for polytunnels.
- 5.3 The polytunnels are of typical design and are sited on an area of low lying land which will minimise visual and landscape effects.
- 5.4 The proposal is in compliance with National and Local Planning Policy supporting a sustainable rural enterprise.