



February 2025

Erection of 32no. Polytunnels (Retrospective) Supporting Agricultural Appraisal

At
**Manor Farm
Finchampstead
Wokingham
Berkshire
RG40 3TL**

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Long Toll, Woodcote,
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1	INTRODUCTION	3
2	BACKGROUND	3
3	PLANNING POLICY	5
4	APPRAISAL.....	6
5	SUMMARY	8

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 horticultural justification appraisal for the erection of 32no. polytunnels (retrospective) to support an existing soft fruits business located at 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, a further approval to allow year round polythene sheeting under planning application 201428, and approval under planning application 242449 (approved November 2024) for the retrospective siting of a block of 5 polytunnels.
- 2.3 The applicant seeks to have the same year round sheeting allowance on these proposed (retrospective) block of 32 polytunnels which were erected in January 2025.
- 2.4 Photographs taken by the applicant in February 2025 of the 32 polytunnels subject to this application against existing and approved polytunnels on site are included below:





3 Planning Policy

3.1 National planning policy is provided in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which was updated in December 2024. 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are no relevant development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out-of-date, granting permission.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 39 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; and
- 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 total land 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 an irrigation reservoir.
- 4.2 The proposed development in this planning application comprises the retrospective erection of a block of 32 polytunnels for the propagation of blueberry plants located in the northern area of the farm holding, south of the polytunnels approved under planning applications 191112 and 242449. The area has already been used for the growing of blueberries (uncovered) however, the applicant is losing approximately 20 tonnes of the blueberry crop each year across the holding to wild birds eating or destroying them, which results in a significant cost to the business.
- 4.3 In addition, the provision of a covered cropping area will allow the applicant to produce a supply of British grown blueberries a month earlier than the typical outdoor harvested blueberries. This means that British blueberries will be ready for harvest in June each year, rather than July and available in shops.
- 4.4 The Southern High Bush blueberry variety grown by the applicant has a superior flavour but does not cope with winter weather conditions and therefore it has been kept in two covered tunnels within the area of this application. The other varieties grown by the applicant require a minimum of 1,200 chill hours and it is intended that these will be covered from February.
- 4.5 The polytunnels are each 7.7m wide and range between 45m to 100m in length with a maximum height of 3m. The total length of polytunnels erected currently at the site is 5.93km within 9.2 hectares of land, including those the subject of this application.
- 4.6 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.

- 4.7 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.
- 4.8 Since the UK withdrew from the European Union; EU Plants has continued to adapt its business model whilst allowing for maximum flexibility.
- 4.9 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 continue to meet an ever increasing demand for UK fruit production.
- 4.10 Demand for British grown soft fruit had been unprecedented throughout Covid-19 and post Covid 19 and the reduced import of soft fruit, with the continuing benefits of farm produce field to fork as noted by DEFRA.
- 4.11 Manor Farm currently comprises a total of 9.2 hectares of polytunnels on the 36.3 hectare site (25%) and this retrospective application sees an increase of 1.94 hectares of polytunnels or 5.3% of the land holding.
- 4.12 The applicant considers that this ratio allows optimum production of farm produce on the farm.
- 4.13 The proposed polytunnels, the subject of this planning application 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.
- 4.14 The polytunnels are of typical design which has previously been accepted by the Council in planning applications F/2011/2620, 160643, 161194, 191112 and 242449.
- 4.15 The 32 polytunnels are laid out in a block covering 1.94 hectares (including access track) in the middle section of the farm holding.
- 4.16 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.
- 4.17 The polytunnels are located in an existing open field and there will be no impact on existing boundary trees and hedgerows.
- 4.18 The polytunnels can be accessed via existing farm tracks.
- 4.19 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 planning applications for polytunnels on the site, and not lead 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 32 additional retrospective polytunnels are required to allow the applicant's enterprise to continue growing and meet the ever increasing 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 5.3% covered by polytunnels on the land holding. This will result in a total of 25% 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.