



de Courcy
town planning consultants

**Erection of extension to
existing pack house
following demolition of
existing structures**

**Heathlands Farm, Honey
Hill, Wokingham, RG40
3BG**

Prepared For
Hall Hunter Partnership

1265
May 2025

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
2	DESCRIPTION OF SITE	2
3	DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENT	3
4	BUSINESS CASE FOR THE PROPOSED EXTENSION	4
5	RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY	6
6	RELEVANT POLICY CONSIDERATIONS AND COMPLIANCE	7
7	PRE-APPLICATION FEEDBACK AND RESPONSE	13
8	CONCLUSIONS	15

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This Planning, Design and Access Statement has been prepared in support of the accompanying planning application submitted on behalf of Hall Hunter Partnership (HHP), who own and operate Heathlands Farm, to provide background information to assist the Council in considering the proposals for the site.

1.2 In addition to this Planning, Design and Access Statement and the accompanying plans the following documents are submitted in support of the application:

- Transport Statement produced by Bellamy Roberts
- Surface Water Drainage Strategy produced by Bellamy Roberts
- Statutory Biodiversity Matric Calculation prepared by John Wenman Ecology
- BNG Condition Assessments prepared by John Wenman Ecology
- Preliminary Ecological Assessment including BNG Assessment prepared by John Wenman Ecology

1.3 This application is made following the receipt of pre-application advice from the Council by letter dated 21st March 2025, reference 250421. The feedback received is summarised in Section 6 of this statement.

2 DESCRIPTION OF SITE

- 2.1 The site lies within the Heathlands Farm complex which lies to the east of Heathlands Road and to the south of Honey Hill. Heathlands Farm extends to 82 hectares and produces soft fruit grown mainly in polytunnels. The farm comprises about 50 hectares of polytunnels, cold storage and pack house buildings, staff accommodation and the administrative offices for HHP. The farm is a major producer of blueberries, strawberries and raspberries. More recently the farm has invested heavily in expanding the blueberry crop on the farm. HHP also produce blueberries at Sheeplands Farm, also within Wokingham Borough.
- 2.2 The existing pack house and cold store buildings lie within the centre of Heathlands Farm. To the north of these buildings are HHP's offices and staff parking. To the east are mobile homes which accommodate staff employed on the farm and to the south are recently installed solar panels. Access to the existing pack house is from Heathlands Road.

3 DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENT

- 3.1 It is proposed to extend the existing pack house southwards into the yard area and onto an open grassed area between the existing yard and the solar panels to the south. The existing polytunnel storage areas in the yard area (182 sq.m) would be removed to make way for the proposed extension.
- 3.2 The proposed pack house extension would have a floor area of 2982 sq.m
- 3.3 The existing access and turning area for HGVs would be retained in a central courtyard. One additional HGV loading bay would be formed within the extended pack house. The extension would replace existing temporary covered structures within the yard area used for pallet storage.
- 3.4 The proposed extension would be clad in the same material as the existing building (Kingspan composite panel in light grey).
- 3.5 Disabled access would be provide within the proposed extension together with a disabled toilet.

4 BUSINESS CASE FOR THE PROPOSED EXTENSION

4.1 HHP are one of the largest berry producers in the country and supply many of the leading supermarkets and operates the following farms:

- Heathlands and Birchin Inghams Farm, Wokingham - 82 hectares (205 acres)
- Sheeplands Farm, Wargrave - 85 hectares (210 acres)
- Tuesley Farm, Godalming - 178 hectares (463 acres)
- Eashing Farm, Godalming – 26 Hectares (65 acres)

4.2 In total HHP employs about 300 full-time and 1200 seasonal workers.

4.3 HHP has invested in increasing its blueberry crop over the last 5 years to meet customer demand. 800,000 blueberry plants in total have been planted and once fully developed will produce a steady yield of 4000 tonnes per year. Currently there is no blueberry grader at Heathlands Farm. These are large machines which process the blueberries into weighed and quality checked punnets. Additional space is also required to operate robotic trucks which would replace the need for manual forklifts and pallet handling. This would improve health and safety and reduce operational costs.

4.4 There is currently capacity for 1,900 pallets and packing facilities for 266 tonnes of blueberries per week which is inadequate to process the increasing blueberry tonnage. Capacity would need to increase by 537 pallets and an additional 500 tonnes of blueberries per week next year.

4.5 By 2027 there would be a storage deficit of 1403 pallets and a grading shortfall of 1500 tonnes as a result of the increasing blueberry yields.

4.6 Currently pallets and packaging materials are stored within the packhouse yard due to a lack of internal space creating congestion and safety risks. The provision of indoor storage would address these issues by freeing up space in the yard, creating safer and more efficient movement around the site as well as streamlining packaging operations.

- 4.7 In addition, additional refrigerated storage capacity is required to accommodate the increased yield. Maintaining a controlled cold chain is essential for preserving the quality of the berries.
- 4.8 In addition to the increased refrigerated storage space, further space is needed to allow greater automation and operational efficiency, improving health and safety and reducing the requirement for increasing seasonal labour.
- 4.9 The additional grading machine would utilise about 1.500 sq.m (50 x 30 metres) in the proposed extension. The remainder of the space would be taken up with cold storage and internal packaging and pallet storage whilst allowing additional space for advanced automisation within the buildings.
- 4.10 These measures would increase capacity and efficiency as well as improving health and safety for workers internally and externally. The use of advanced automation and resulting efficiencies means that there would be no requirement to increase staffing numbers to cater for the increased throughput. This would allow HHP to remain competitive in a highly competitive market and in the face of cheap overseas imports.

5 RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

5.1 The following planning history is relevant to this application:

Application reference	Description	Decision
F/2012/0176	Proposed installation of solar PV panels to SSE roof of refrigeration unit.	Approved 22/03/2012
192244	Full application for the proposed erection of a single storey extension to the east elevation of the existing soft fruit processing plant to provide additional space for automated processing and packaging.	Approved 17/12/2019
192245	Full application for the proposed erection of a single storey extension to the south elevation of the existing soft fruit processing plant to provide covered storage for pallets and packaging.	Approved 17/12/2019
223019	Application for a certificate of existing lawful development for the use of land for the siting of 41 mobile homes occupied by agricultural workers with associated operational development	Approved 07/12/2022
230627	Full application for the proposed stationing of 12no. 2-bedroom static mobile homes for seasonal agricultural workers associated with Heathlands Farm, June to September inclusive (Part-retrospective)	Approved 06/07/2023
231524	Full application for the proposed installation of no. 1,762 Photovoltaic Panels, each panels mounted on no. 4 concrete footings.	Approved 14/12/2023

6 RELEVANT POLICY CONSIDERATIONS AND COMPLIANCE

- 6.1 Section 38(6) of the Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires that planning applications are determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. In this case the development plan comprises the Wokingham Borough Core Strategy (CS), adopted in January 2010, and the Managing Development Delivery Local Plan (MDD) (2014)
- 6.2 Policy CP1 of the CS promotes sustainable development and requires that new development, inter alia, maintains or enhances the high quality of the environment and demonstrates how schemes help reduce the need to travel, particularly by car. In addition, the policy seeks to encourage development which will contribute to reaching zero carbon.
- 6.3 The production of blueberries in the UK to meet customer demand from blueberries is inherently sustainable. The alternative is to fly in blueberries from overseas from as far afield as Chile. Increasing UK production of blueberries results in a significant carbon saving.
- 6.4 HHP are required by their customers to minimize the use of carbon in their operations and this requirement runs through all of HHP's operations. The proposed improvements in efficiency deriving from the proposals would ensure that the business would make better use of HGV capacity. No additional staff would be required due to the automation of HHP's grading and packing operations.
- 6.5 The location of the proposed extension and its proposed design would ensure that the proposals would have no harmful impact on the quality of the environment whilst reducing reliance on overseas berries and ensuring that HGV movements are minimised. In addition the adjacent PV panels would provide power for the pack house. For these reasons it is considered that the development would meet the requirements of policy CP1.
- 6.6 Policy CP3 requires that the proposals are in character within the area and have no detrimental impact on important ecology or landscapes. Similarly, policy CP7 and TB23 of the MDD seeks to deliver enhancements to biodiversity.

- 6.7 The proposed extension stands centrally within the farm and is screened from public view by the fencing, trees and hedges alongside Heathlands Road and Honey Hill provide further visual containment.
- 6.8 The proposed extension would be of a scale and appearance similar to the existing pack house and cold store building. The proposed building would also sit into the slope, further reducing the impact of the building.
- 6.9 There are no trees, hedges or features of ecological significance within the site which comprises mainly of hardstanding or recently sown grass.
- 6.10 A preliminary ecological assessment is submitted with this application. This does not recommend any additional surveys but suggests that avoidance measures are adopted to mitigate risk to Great Crested Newts, reptile and small mammals (see para 9.3 in the PEA). It is suggested that these measures are secured by condition.
- 6.11 The application is accompanied by a BNG assessment and a Statutory Biodiversity Metric which demonstrate that the development would achieve the required 10% BNG.
- 6.12 For these reasons it is considered that the development would meet the policy requirements of policies CP3, CP7 and TB23.
- 6.13 Policy CP6 relates to the management of travel demand. Any increase in HGV's is a direct consequence of rising blueberry yields, which will increase regardless of the expansion. The proposed extension would however improve despatch efficiency so that better use can be made of HGV capacity.
- 6.14 The site has good access from Heathlands Road with good visibility and there are no known capacity/safety issues in the road.
- 6.15 The Transport Statement which accompanies the application notes that berries are currently transported to Heathlands Farm from other land formed by HHP. The projected increase in HGV movements would be about 20% over the peak 3 months of production, June to August inclusive. This would represent about 10 HGV movements a day in the peak months, equivalent of about one HGV movement per hour at the busiest times of the year.

6.16 For these reasons it is considered that the proposed development would satisfy policy CP6.

6.17 Policy CP11 relates to development outside defined settlements. The site lies in a countryside location outside of any defined settlement and therefore this policy is relevant. Policy CP11 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

3. It is contained within suitably located buildings which are appropriate for conversion, or in the case of replacement buildings would bring about environmental improvement"

6.18 The HHP operations at Heathlands Farm is a rural operation which requires a countryside location and contributes to the diverse range of employment in the borough. The proposals seek to ensure a viable and sustainable future for the business give strong competition in the sector, particularly from imported berries and deliver sustainable growth. Therefore, it is considered the criterion 1 of policy CP11 is satisfied.

6.19 The proposed extension would be closely related to the existing buildings, mobile homes and PV panels within the farm maintaining a tight building group. The proposal would therefore satisfy criterion 2 of policy CP11.

6.20 It is proposed to remove a number of buildings with the site and internalise stored pallets and materials currently store within the packhouse yard. The removal of this visual clutter and integration within the proposed extensions would improve the visual appearance of the site from within the farm itself. The extensions are sited away from any public vantage

points and would not therefore be harmful in the public domain. For these reasons it is considered that criterion 3 of policy CP11.

- 6.21 Policy CC04 of the MDD seeks to deliver high quality and sustainably designed and constructed development. In this case the proposed development would be designed to achieve the energy efficiencies required by Building Regulations. The proposal would also benefit from the availability of electricity from the adjoining PV field.
- 6.22 The policy also seeks to encourage the on-site recycling of waste. The existing polytunnel structures on the site to be removed would be repurposed where possible within the farms operated by HHP.
- 6.23 Waste from the operations on the site would continue to be handled in the same way as currently. Any recyclable cardboard and plastics would be minimized for collection by a commercial waste operator. Other waste is collected in skips which are collected by the waste operator. Waste blueberries are also collected and transported to an anaerobic digester.
- 6.24 Policy CC05 of the MDD requires that proposals for new development deliver a minimum 10% reduction in carbon emissions through renewable energy or low carbon technology. In this case, the extension will benefit from electricity generated by the on-site PVs. This would satisfy the 10% requirement.
- 6.25 The requirement of sustainable drainage is set out in policy CC10 of the MDD. A SuDS strategy is put forward in this application to address this policy requirement.
- 6.26 Policy TB12 of the MDD Local Plan states that proposals for major development should be accompanied by an Employment and Skills plan to show how the proposal accords opportunities for training, apprenticeship or other vocational initiatives to develop local employability skills.
- 6.27 While the proposed extension to the packhouse is primarily designed to enhance operational efficiency through greater automation, rather than to increase headcount. HHP is committed to supporting local employability and skills development.

6.28 HHP recognises that its employees are its principal asset and is proactive in providing structured training and development opportunities across all levels of its operations. This includes:

- A comprehensive induction training programme for all new staff, ensuring familiarity with HHP's processes, policies, and systems from day one
- Ongoing in-house training in technical, managerial, and interpersonal skills, with training needs reviewed annually as part of individual appraisals
- Support for staff pursuing vocational or professional qualifications, including potential financial assistance with course fees and time off for study, subject to operational considerations
- A Time Off for Training Policy that encourages employees to pursue relevant qualifications to enhance their skills and long-term employability, both within HHP and the wider labour market
- An inclusive workforce culture, welcoming both local and seasonal workers and providing them with valuable employment and skill-building opportunities in the UK food supply chain

6.29 Policy TB20 of the MDD seeks to ensure that servicing and deliveries to employment uses does not have a harmful impact on, inter alia, amenity, environmental impact and highway safety. The level of traffic increase generated by the proposed development would be unlikely to have any harmful impact given the low level of HGV movements as set out in paragraph 6.15 above. There are no residential properties close to the yard area or the access to the site. The Transport Assessment indicated that it is unlikely that the development would have a significant impact on highway safety.

6.30 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is a material consideration.

6.31 The NPPF seeks to build a strong and competitive economy. Paragraph 85 of the NPPF notes:

"Planning policies and decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt. Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development."

6.32 Paragraph 88 of the NPPF seeks to support a prosperous rural economy' and states:

"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"*

6.33 The proposed development would enable HHP to invest, expand and adapt to enable its farming operations to remain a sustainable footing which is fully supported by national policy.

7 PRE-APPLICATION FEEDBACK AND RESPONSE

7.1 The pre-application advice received from the Council, dated 21st March 2025 confirms the Council view that:

- The farm is considered to be a sustainable rural enterprise in compliance with criterion 1 of policy CP11
- Whilst the response notes the large size of the proposal, the extension would be well enveloped by existing development/structures on the farm and the Council do not consider that this would represent excessive encroachment in the context of the site in compliance with criterion 2 of policy CP11
- The feedback noted that several structures would need to be removed to facilitate the extensions. These structures are unattractive and their replacement would form a more cohesive layout in compliance with criterion 3 of policy CP11
- The response advises that, overall, it is likely the proposals would have an acceptable impact on the character of the farm and the prevailing rural landscape
- Whilst the automation would not increase staff numbers, the application would need to be accompanied by a Transport Statement
- SuDS drainage will be required to minimise surface water flows and a drainage strategy should be submitted
- The proposals would improve the farm's layout overall and the visual harm to the wider landscape would be considered limited to moderate
- The economic, social and environmental benefits of expanding the facilities at the farm are acknowledged and accepted
- Clarification of the proposals for the segregation of waste should be provided

- The feedback advises that the area is listed as potentially contaminated on the Council's inventory and therefore potential contamination should be dealt with in the application

7.2 In response to the pre-application feedback a SuDS drainage strategy and Transport Statement are submitted in support of the application. Waste recycling is addressed in paragraph 6.23 of this statement.

7.3 With regard to the potential for contamination, this is not a matter which was an issue in the consideration and determination of the application for the erection of the three dwellings to the north-western side of the existing pack house or the permission for the additional mobile homes to the south-east of the pack house. The siting of the proposed extension is now largely covered in concrete and in part would be sited over former agricultural land used for agricultural purposes (see Photo.1 below). This land was previously covered by polytunnels production. In view of this it is suggested that the matter is dealt with by way of considition.



Photo.1 – Aerial photograph of site taken in 2005 (source Google Earth)

8 CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 The pack house extension would enable HPP to grade and pack the increasing yield of blueberries which have already been planted. The space internally is required in order to handle of tonnage of blueberries produced by HHP as well as enabling operational efficiencies through automation.
- 8.2 The production of blueberries on the land operated by HHP is more sustainable than importing blueberries from overseas. The increased efficiencies the proposals would deliver would help HHP to compete and grow in a competitive market, thus ensuring the continued contribution of Heathlands farm and other farms operated by HPP to the local economy.
- 8.3 The increase in HGV traffic movements during peak seasons would be limited and can safely be accommodated on the local road network.
- 8.4 The proposed building is well contained visually within the landscape and would have no harmful impact on the character and appearance of the area or the amenities of the area.
- 8.5 For the above reasons set out in this statement it is considered that the development would satisfy the requirements of the development plan.