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Objectives

- To make the best use of natural resources and existing infrastructure.
- To produce soft fruit that meets UK market demand
- To achieve the above in a way that is not significantly harmful to the landscape or the local community.
- To build upon the existing successful soft fruit enterprise, meet customer demands and ensure long term viability.

Context

The application site forms part of the Groves Farm agricultural holding south west of the A259 at Bersted. Polytunnels will be erected to maintain the crop rotation that is an essential long term agricultural requirement. The growing of soft fruit in polytunnels has been thriving on this farm and others close by for sometime. The proposed polytunnels will allow the farm to continue to meet the needs of their customers (the supermarkets).

The site for the proposed polytunnels is located to the south west of Elbridge Farm buildings and the A259. The application site is surrounded by farmland used for soft fruit growing. There is a reservoir to the west and a caravan park to the south east.

The application land is not prominent in the flat landscape of the gap between Chichester and Bognor Regis and is not overlooked from high ground. There is existing hedgerow along the boundaries of the field.

The agricultural land at Groves has been used for intensive salad crop production and its appearance is very much that of modern efficient working farmland. The application land is not in a sensitive location or an area of high landscape value.

Polytunnels on the holding to the west of the application site were granted consent under Chichester District Council planning permissions O/09/00433/FUL and O/08/02777/FUL.

Strawberries are grown within the reserved area which has been enlarged to reflect the indicated market demand that the applicants can now forecast more accurately following a successful season last year. The additional tunnels will also assist with effective cropping regimes and rotational use.

Appearance, Amount, Layout & Scale

The soft fruit (strawberries, raspberries and blackcurrants) will be grown within the reserved area. The increased demand for soft fruit reflects the forecasted market demand.

The amount of polytunnel coverage proposed reflects the applicant's current needs and intention to make the best use of available land. The proposals seek to obtain permission for 12 hectares of polytunnels.

The proposed polytunnels are aligned with the western edge of the field leaving a 5m strip around the perimeter of the field. The position of the polytunnels will vary from year to year due to crop rotation.

The scale of the tunnels are standard for soft fruit polytunnels and are comparable with the existing polytunnels on the holding.

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The polytunnels will be screened from outside the site by the existing hedgerow.

Between February and November (inclusive) polythene protection is required for the fruit grown. The polythene will be taken down between December and January (inclusive).

Landscape Considerations

The applicants have selected this location following assessment of the holding and the wider landscape as well as operational need.

The farmland margins around the area reserved for polytunnels will be seeded with a wild flower mixture, this has proven successful at other local farms.

There is an established mature hedgerow of 6 – 8ft around the perimeter of the application site that will be retained.

Lighting

There is no lighting in the polytunnels.

Employment

No changes to existing labour force or accommodation arrangements are proposed.

Disposal of waste polythene / sustainability

The applicants have introduced an efficient recycling regime that ensures waste polythene is recycled and wire, steel and rope recycled or reused where ever possible.

Socio Economic Context

Need for Further Soft fruit Growing Areas at Groves Farm

The applicant's investment and commitment to the introduction of a new soft fruit regime at the farm has been rewarded by successful seasons and a request from customers to supply additional quantities of soft fruit this year.

This request has resulted in the need for this additional application for a further area of soft fruit tunnels at the farm.

The proposals are more than reasonably necessary for the purposes of agriculture on this holding.

Success of British Soft Fruit Farming

To meet supermarket and consumer demands soft fruit has to be grown to very precise quality specifications.

Polythene protection for the soft fruit crop is an essential part of producing the quality of fruit that is required and allows around a 60% reduction in pesticide use.

Polytunnels, combined with the development of early and late fruiting varieties, also offer British customers an alternative to imports from Spain and California.

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Imported strawberries are regarded as less tasty than home-grown strawberries. Consumers are familiar with the concepts of food miles, freshness, sourcing locally and are becoming resistant to the need to import food from overseas when it can be produced in the UK. Demand is high and is predicted to grow in the future.

The advent of polytunnels now allows UK farmers to guarantee continuity of supply throughout an eight month season to the extent that strawberries are now regarded as mainstream fruit along with bananas, apples and citrus.

As Israel, Egypt and Spain can guarantee a supply of strawberries for the remaining four months of the year strawberries are now part of the important "basket" of fruits that are used by multiples to compare each other's prices. Being seen in this light has kept the price of strawberries highly competitive with the benefit of extending the market to include new consumers from less affluent households, younger customers and small family units.

The microclimate in the Chichester Plain are has proven to be ideally suited to the production of soft fruit for the early English market. The fruit produced tends to be some of the earliest available in the UK and in much demand.

Benefits of Tunnels

The crop protection afforded by polytunnels allows farmers to produce quality fruit for eight months of the year. Without crop protection only imported soft fruit would dominate our supermarket shelves and farmers market stalls. The use of polytunnels also contributes positively to a reduction in food miles.

Without polytunnels protection the season becomes too short and the quality produced does not meet the specification demanded by retailers.

Retailers (mostly the large supermarket chains) demand high levels of continuity of supply even when weather conditions change.

Retailers need to be confident in the reliability of supply for their operating regimes which are often 7 days a week with extended opening hours.

In addition there are significantly fewer fruit disease and other related quality problems with fruit grown under polytunnels. The tunnels are also important for bringing on the young plants.

The applicants' introduction of polytunnels on the holding has confirmed the viability of the soft fruit farming enterprise.

Existing land, machinery, and farming infrastructure is used to produce an alternative crop that meets market demand and produces an income stream.
The success of soft fruit production is reflected in this application for additional tunnels to enable the applicants to meet exiting and forecasted market demand.

Planning Context

The site lies within the strategic gap between Chichester and Bognor and it forms part of an established agricultural holding.

It is considered that the proposals accord with the aims and intentions of national and local planning policy. In particular:
Arun District Local Plan 2003

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GEN1 Sustainability
GEN2 Built-up Area Boundary
GEN3 Protection of the Countryside

The proposed polytunnels meet the operational needs of agriculture.

AREA10 Strategic Gaps

DEV3 Horticulture

The proposed polytunnels

- will not result in adverse impact on the surrounding environment and landscape;
- not result in a loss of long views across substantially open land
- have adequate water resources available
- adequate surface water drainage capacity exists or can be provided as part of the development.

Although not strictly horticulture the applicant notes that Arun District Council acknowledge the importance of growing crops under cover.

PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas

Agricultural development

27. The Government recognises the important and varied roles of agriculture, including in the maintenance and management of the countryside and most of our valued landscapes. Planning policies in RSS and LDDs should recognise these roles and support development proposals that will enable farming and farmers to:

(i) become more competitive, sustainable and environmentally friendly;
(ii) adapt to new and changing markets;
(iii) comply with changing legislation and associated guidance;
(iv) diversify into new agricultural opportunities (e.g. renewable energy crops); or
(v) broaden their operations to 'add value' to their primary produce.

The letter regarding polytunnels from Paul Hudson, Chief Planner Communities and Local Government to all chief planning officers advises that planning authorities should recognise the important and varied role of agriculture and support proposals that promote sustainable, diverse and adaptable agricultural sectors.

The applicant when considering the proposals has also paid particular attention to the following publications:

- Policy Position Statement issued by the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (June 2006)
- The National Farmers Union Planning Guidance on Polytunnels (April 2006)
- The Grower Code of Practice
  The Voluntary Code of Practice established by Herefordshire Council

These codes all stress the need for as sensitive a location as possible, emphasising that Polytunnels are an asset to farmers and farming communities and contributing to the economy locally and nationally.

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English grown soft fruits, such as strawberries and raspberries have become an important and successful rural business. Sales in UK supermarkets of home-grown berries have increased by 130% in the last four years (British Summer Fruits Association, (April 2005).

The interests of agriculture and the protection of the landscape should be reconciled to accommodate the use of polytunnels where appropriate. It is also important that the LPA and the wider community recognise that polytunnels can offer business and employment opportunities for farmers and contribute to the local food network.

Involvement of local interests

There has not been any involvement of local interests with respect to this particular application.

Access and Highway Considerations

There are no known environmental constraints on this site to restrict or impede accessibility.

No specific access issues have been identified, the proposals do not involve any changes to the existing arrangements and as such access will be provided in line with that already existing. There will be no change to the existing route taken by vehicles transporting the soft fruit to a packhouse.

Flood Risk

A separate flood risk assessment has been submitted as part of this planning application.

Climate Change

Although no construction is involved the use of polytunnels will ensure that the key planning objectives of PPS1 are met, particularly in respect of the following matters:

Resource and energy efficiency

1a. Water Efficiency
It is the applicant's intention to ensure that surface water is managed appropriately. Trickle irrigation within the tunnels reduces water use.

1b. Sustainable Construction
No construction is involved in this application.

1c. On Site Renewable Energy
Polytunnels harness and maximise solar energy.

Existing land, machinery, and farming infrastructure is used to produce a crop that meets market demand and produces an income stream. The polythene used is recycled at the end of its useful life.

Reducing the need to travel

The use of polytunnels contributes positively to a reduction in food miles. The crop protection afforded by polytunnels allows farmers to produce quality fruit for eight

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months of the year. Without crop protection imported soft fruit would dominate our supermarket shelves.

Adapting to climate change

Polythene protection for the soft fruit crop is an essential part of producing the quality of fruit that is required and allows around a 60% reduction in pesticide use.

The advent of polytunnels now allows UK farmers to guarantee continuity of supply throughout an eight month season to the extent that strawberries are now regarded as mainstream fruit along with bananas, apples and citrus.

Growing soft fruit in natural soil is a crop requiring high level farming skills, management and equipment. Without polytunnels protection the season becomes too short and the quality produced does not meet the specification demanded by retailers.

Retailers (mostly the large supermarket chains) demand high levels of continuity of supply even when weather conditions change.

In addition there are significantly fewer fruit disease and other related quality problems with fruit grown under polytunnels. The tunnels are also important for bringing on the young plants.

Precedent

The LPA have already agreed that soft fruit tunnels are appropriate on parts of this holding and the applicant is aware of a number of other horticultural and farm holdings in Chichester District where polytunnels have been considered acceptable.

Conclusion

Soft fruit farming at Groves Farm has already proved successful, the proposed additional polytunnels will enable the applicants to react to market demands reinforcing the success of these new longer season crops to the farm, ensure the long term vitality and viability of the farm business.

The proposals accord with current national and local policies will not prove detrimental to the amenities of neighbouring occupiers or the surrounding landscape and will enable the on going success of this established local business.

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