

August 2024

**Horticultural Viability
Assessment Longacres
Nursery, Eastergate La,
Walberton, BN18 0BA**

On Behalf of Messrs Pearce



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Non-Technical Summary

- Long Acres Nursery was a regular small horticultural nursery in Eastergate Lane Warburton. It is typical of many small family-run that operated in the Arun District area, until about 15-20 years ago.
- Production was historically focussed on flower production and some tomato growing mainly for local markets and for transport to London.
- An assessment of the economic viability of the site reveals that the unit is not currently viable, longer term structural changes in the wider horticultural industry, retailing and general energy costs, make the site unlikely to be considered a long-term production site.
- The main glasshouse on the site has reached an age whereby it is technically redundant. Some of the glass panels are broken and whilst the physical structure is stable, the fixings, such as bolts and uprights are showing signs of corrosion. The ventilation, heating and irrigation systems are all damaged beyond repair or have been removed and the cost of replacement for such a modest sized greenhouse is prohibitive.
- The site has certain physical and locational constraints that also make the longer-term use of the site for horticulture less likely. This is a small site, with limited potential for expansion. It is constrained by neighbouring development and a divided land ownership. The loss of this site to non-horticultural development does not represent a strategic loss to Arun District (or West Sussex) Horticulture and would not harm the future vitality and/or viability of the local glasshouse industry.
- A separate assessment and report on the soils and agricultural land quality demonstrates that the land is not 'Best and Most Versatile' within the standard Agricultural Land Classification definition, with most of the site designated as Grade 3b quality and a smaller area considered as 'Farm Buildings'.

1. Introduction

1.1 Landscape Land and Property has been asked by Douglas Briggs Partnership to provide a Horticultural Viability Assessment of land at Long Acres Nursery, Walberton to consider the agricultural capability of the site and the horticultural capability of the site.

1.2 The site at 0.7 hectares in total forms part of the wider Eastergate Road area famous for glasshouse horticultural production. The current make-up of the overall site incorporates half of a 1960's era greenhouse and an area of land that is semi-derelict pasture, where greenhouses used to exist.

1.3 Long Acres is not currently an active nursery and has not operated commercially for over a decade. There is a small area utilised for family garden production only. Douglas Briggs Partnership have promoted the site as suitable for redevelopment and consider that this Horticultural Viability Assessment is necessary to better appraise the situation in line with Arun Council Policy.

1.4 The assessment has been undertaken by Sam Franklin BSc (Hons) MSc, MRICS FAAV a Chartered Surveyor and Professional Member of the Institute of Soil Scientists and holder of the Royal Horticultural Society certificate in horticulture.

1.5 This report includes a desk top study of the available information and other horticultural information from the area to give a possible assessment based on experience and overview. In addition, a site survey was undertaken to assess conditions on the ground, together with an interview with the current owner and his agent on the history of the site.

2. Background to the Nursery Site

2.1 Run previously by generations of the Pearce family the operation used to grow mainly flowers and some tomato crops under glass. More recently, flower growing and perishable horticultural crops both in the UK have declined, with production centres in Spain, Holland, Italy, Morocco and Israel, to source year-round production of a full range of crops, making UK based production more specialised and in some cases, less profitable.

2.2 The Long Acres nursery site is physically constituted in two parts, divided down the middle. As such the one existing glasshouse is in fact equally divided across the wider site and the two halves are both physically separate and legally in different ownership, though the glasshouse building is effectively semi-detached.

2.2 The overall site is historically part of the wider Eastergate Lane horticultural area which traditionally included a number of small holdings and horticultural enterprises, typically family run, that over time have either consolidated into a few specialist operations or ceased horticultural activity. Some of the similar small units locally have damaged or demolished greenhouses and the land is now used for non-agricultural purposes.

2.3 Around half this site was at one time covered in greenhouses (see photo below) or other structures associated with the nursery, the remaining area includes a dwelling, packing shed and hardstanding for manoeuvring or parking. The area of former glasshouses is now scrub-grassland and there is a partial orchard.

Old Photograph of site showing extent of greenhouses.



3. Local Plan Policy

3.1 Local Plan Policy states:-

11.2 Horticulture

11.2.1 Horticulture is a key employment sector in the Arun District. The commercial horticulture industry has a significant presence in the areas surrounding Angmering; Barnham and Pagham. Horticultural activities include protected cropping (glasshouses and polytunnels), open field production and horticultural-produce packing facilities.

11.2.2 In addition to growing horticultural products, the industry is evolving to meet customer demand and is importing, processing, packing and distributing produce all year round.

11.2.3 The Council's Economic Strategy identifies the Horticulture sector as one of four key sectors which are particularly strong in the local economy and offers good opportunities for economic development and job creation. Recognising this, the Council adopted a Horticultural Local Development Order, to assist the horticulture sector, on 14th September 2016 to be applied to identified area(s) of the LDO for a period of 10 years. The evidence base notes that the horticultural sector has significant growth potential and that provision should be made for larger scale horticultural operation expansion within an overall rationalisation of the sector (in response to the economics of production linked especially to the costs of energy and water resources).

11.2.4 Employment in horticulture is particularly seasonal and consequently there are demands to house transient and/or migrant workers. Refer to policy in the 'Housing Delivery' section.

11.2.5 Proposals for development on sites of open field horticulture shall be subject to the Soils Policy. Proposals for development relating to protected cropping (i.e. glasshouses and polytunnels) shall be subject to the Horticulture policy. It is recognised that glasshouses normally use growing mediums other than soil and so their operation does not necessarily rely on the quality of agricultural land. However, other important factors for glasshouses are the number of daylight hours, the light levels and the climate which makes the south coast a good location for glasshouses.

11.2.6 The economic life of a glasshouse is typically 20 to 25 years (27). When a glasshouse structure is no longer viable for commercial horticulture cropping it may become redundant and fall into disuse and eventual dereliction. In Planning terms, glasshouses are regarded as temporary structures related to the horticultural use of the land. If a glasshouse or polytunnel is no longer commercially viable, the structure should normally be removed and the land returned to its original use, or some other Productive Green Environment, unless otherwise agreed by Arun District Council.

11.2.7 The Council encourages new investment in glasshouse units, but is aware of the potential impact they can have on the landscape, transport, water resources and residential amenity. The Council seeks to support a sustainable rural economy. The Council recognises that the modern glasshouse industry is evolving and functions with glasshouse design at a larger scale than historically. The modern horticultural glasshouse industry is combining energy production into glasshouse use which can be to the benefit of local residents and businesses. Combined glasshouses and energy production hubs operate at a large scale to be economically sustainable for the industry.

The Council supports the use of renewable energy within its policies on Adapting to Climate Change and Energy and Climate Change Mitigation.

11.2.8 Renewal of existing glasshouse structures will be considered on a case by case basis depending on the merits of the application. Renewing an existing structure for the same use will not need to meet the redundancy criteria. However the renewed structure would need to be the same size and scale as the existing structure, or else the criteria for new glasshouses shall apply.

11.2.9 Evidence from the horticultural industry (28) notes that where existing horticultural businesses relocate, they leave behind less modern but still functional facilities. Also local experience suggests that there is an ongoing demand for older lower tech glasshouses by businesses that may not be in the position to invest in building new glasshouses.

11.2.10 When Horticultural sites are developed for non-horticultural purposes, horticultural businesses often need to relocate to new sites. The Council recognises that in these circumstances, relocation within Arun of existing horticultural businesses should be, where possible, enabled and facilitated by all parties (the landowner, applicant, horticultural business and the Council) to protect employment and to allow existing horticultural business to continue to contribute to the local economy.

HOR DM1

3. Redevelopment of under-used, redundant or derelict glasshouses, polytunnels or packhouses will be supported provided that:

- a. The redundancy of the structure or building to the owner and the horticultural or agricultural industry is proven by the applicant to the satisfaction of the Council; and
- b. The land is remediated from any contaminated material(s) and the land is used for the direct diversification of horticulture or other productive green environment or is a countryside-based enterprise activity which supports the rural economy; and
- c. All proposed works include full details of new landscaping, screening and of any trees or vegetation or structures to be retained on the site

Proposals for redevelopment of horticultural sites for non-horticultural purposes will be considered on a case by case basis against Policy C SP1. To reduce the impact on the sector, applicants/landowners shall be required to work with the Council and any existing horticultural businesses on the site to enable and facilitate relocation within the Arun district of the existing horticultural business in order to protect employment and to allow the existing horticultural business to continue to contribute to the local economy.

3.2 This report is written with a view to meeting the redundancy part of policy HOR DM1.

3.3 Where areas of intensive horticulture have been identified in the Local Plan a local development order (LDO) is in place to assist in the development and redevelopment of horticultural sites.

Local Development Order

The Arun Horticulture Local Development Order (the LDO) permits development only within the boundaries identified on the LDO area plans. The extent of the LDO area is shown on the "red line" plans within Appendix A and Appendix B "Description of LDO Areas" of the draft LDO document.

LDO Permitted Development

The developments permitted by the Order shall comprise works to:

- 1. renew, replace or extend existing areas of glasshouses or polytunnels;*
- 2. upgrade areas of polytunnels to glasshouses;*
- 3. renew, replace or extend existing packhouse and distribution buildings;*
- 4. construct water storage reservoirs; and/or*
- 5. provide engineered operational surfaces or access routes (including parking areas) and plant/structures external to any proposed glasshouse, polytunnel or packhouse where these are essential to the proper functioning of the glasshouse, polytunnel or packhouse and/or to comply with development parameters or condition set out in the Order.*

3.4 Eastergate Lane is mostly outside of this area in recognition that much of the historical glasshouse and nursery industry has ceased. The site at Long Acres, has been redundant for many years and the Plan associated with the LDO for Eastergate Lane (**Appendix 2**) excludes Long Acres.

National Policy and Guidance

3.5 A report entitled Future of Horticulture October 2023 produced for UK Parliament investigated the current position of UK Horticulture. The main findings are:

3.6 Key Points

- The horticulture sector cultivates various edible and ornamental plants, contributing to the provision of healthy diets. The UK is mostly reliant on imported horticultural produce.
- The sector faces multiple challenges arising from high energy costs, low profit margins, trade barriers and a dependency on migrant labour, while also mitigating the implications of climate change.
- Technological innovation could help to tackle some of these interconnected challenges. Innovations include automation, greenhouse optimisation, alternative growing media, genome editing, pest management using sensor data and AI-mediated crop monitoring.
- Several barriers may prevent growers from adopting innovations. These include capital investment costs, technology readiness, skills and knowledge communication and ethical concerns relating to labour displacement.
- However, innovation alone may not be sufficient to address all challenges in the sector. A systems approach that considers horticultural policies alongside wider economic, health and environmental policies may be required.

Local Horticultural Studies

3.7 A report entitled Viability of the Horticultural Industry in West Sussex by Reading Agricultural Consultants in March 2009, identifies some of the key issues affecting horticulture in the area.

- ☐ *The West Sussex Coastal Plain is the ideal location for horticulture, as it has the highest winter light levels and one of the best year round climates in the UK.*
- ☐ *The Horticultural Industry in West Sussex produces over £1 billion in annual sales of fruit, vegetables, salads and plants and employs more than 7,000 people.*
- ☐ *Crops are grown all year round in 450 acres (180Ha) of glasshouses and 350 acres (140Ha) of polythene structures.*
- ☐ *West Sussex Growers' make a major contribution towards food, plant and energy security and through local production and import substitution contributes to the reduction in food and plant miles.*
- ☐ *Rain water harvesting and storage, controlled irrigation recycling systems, carbon dioxide capture and green waste management, lead to improvements to the environment and best practice.*
- ☐ *Education and training is of paramount importance to horticultural businesses in West Sussex, with strong links being further developed with local Universities, Colleges and Training Providers.*
- ☐ *The demand for British fresh produce has never been greater. To meet the needs of Customers and to thrive, horticultural businesses in West Sussex need suitable land for development, good infrastructure and supportive planning policies.*

3.8 A report from the West Sussex Growers Association (2023) making recommendations to Government highlights ten key points that need addressing to make the horticultural industry more competitive. These are summarised below:-

1. Access to Labour
2. Access to affordable and sustainable energy supplies
3. Access to Crop Protection
4. Access to water
5. Access to Sustainable Growing Media
6. Productivity Investment
7. Enabling Import Controls for Plants and Plant Products
8. Fairness in the Supply Chain
9. Access to Environmental Funding schemes
10. An enabling Planning Policy

3.9 Not all the points made in the report are relevant to Long Acres, but there are some issues that are pertinent to this site. The Long Acres nursery site is partly constrained physically by private housing such that expansion would be difficult.

3.10 The land is poor quality horticulturally speaking meaning that the site would largely be reliant on container growing or heavy use of water. The soil is difficult to penetrate and a new borehole for irrigation is likely to be not cost effective, even if possible. Historically the unit relied on mains water and rainwater harvesting when possible.

3.11 It is one of the sites where it is likely that expansion might be resisted by the LPA, as it is not within the designated LDO area.

4. Summary and Conclusions

4.1 The site is not considered within one of the land classification grades that constitute Best and Most Versatile, being considered as land of **Grade 3b** quality. The remainder includes structures identified as **Agricultural Buildings** or Non-agricultural uses and therefore outside of any one of the three BMV grades.

4.2 There some debris and structures on the remainder of the site such that even if the glasshouse and other structures were cleared, the site would not be easy to redevelop for horticulture. The possibility of buried structures further lowers the overall capability of the site.

4.3 The nursery area is not effective as a horticultural glasshouse production facility and largescale investment in ventilation, heating and irrigation would be needed to bring the unit back into competitive production. The economics of horticulture are such that at this time the industry struggles to attain profitability, and, in some years, there are losses. Generally, the cost benefit of reinvestment is not worthwhile.

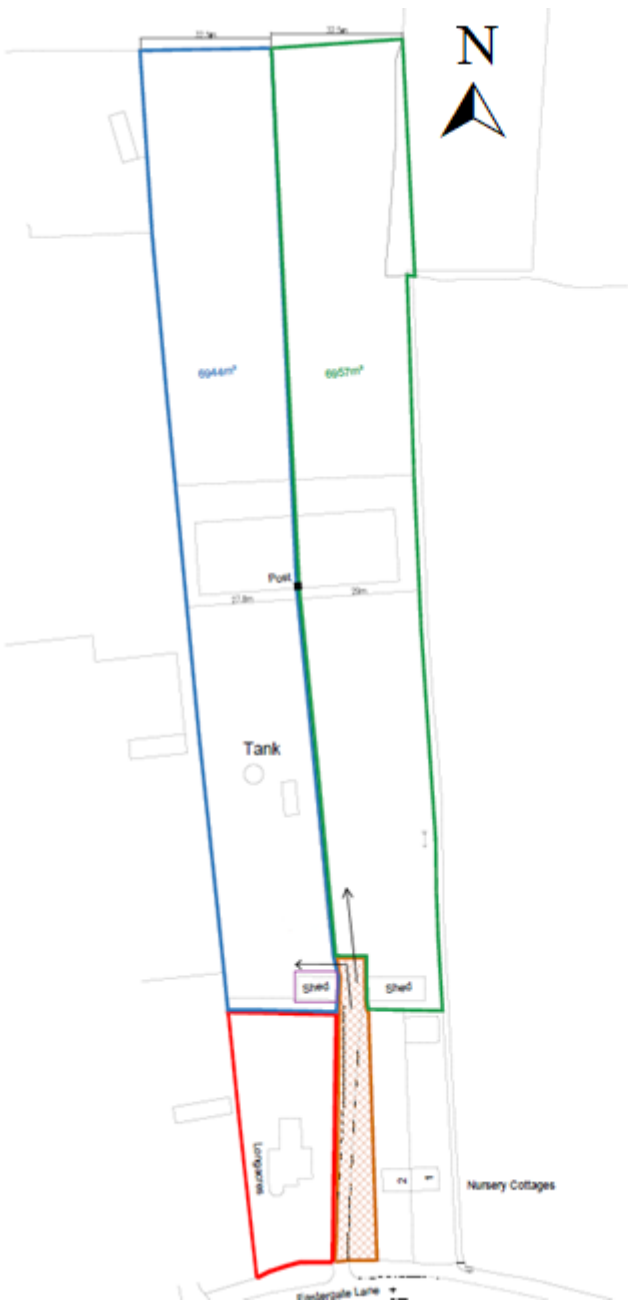
4.4 There is currently insufficient demand to justify expansion at the site or to build new or replacement greenhouses on the former Long Acres part of the nursery. There are structural issues in the UK markets with significant competition from outside of the UK, low prices and a number of producers have left the industry in recent years, citing such issues as high energy costs, labour shortages and cheaper overseas production.

4.5 Some of the useable structures and the greenhouse have reached the end of their working life and would need complete refurbishment or replacement for continued efficient horticultural use, but this is only likely to happen if the prevailing economic climate allows. The site is located within the Eastergate Lane area where some expansion of greenhouse production is supported, but this site is not included in the Local Plan designated area for glasshouse production LDO.

4.6 There is currently some demand for new greenhouse production capacity in the West Sussex area as well as the wider UK, but with the sector struggling due to the prevailing economic conditions this is limited to specialist operations or much larger sites. The potential loss of this site to development does not represent a strategic loss to Arun Horticulture and would not harm the future vitality and/or viability of the local glasshouse industry.

4.7 Overall the site represents a poor prospect for horticulture, with other sites locally offering a more suitable location and facilities, where horticultural investment might be directed.

Appendix 1 Site Plan

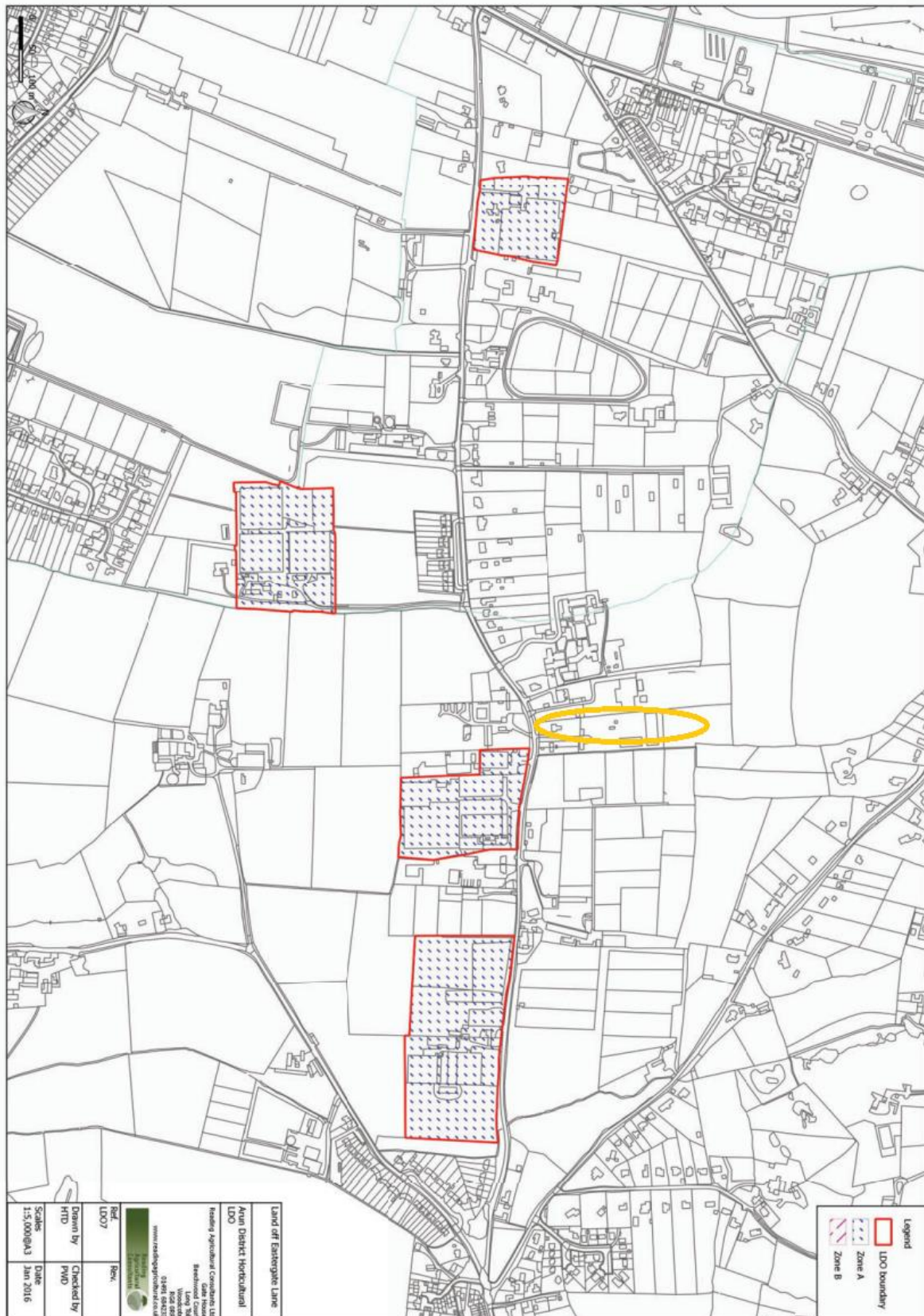


LOCATION PLAN
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6-1020

Project	Site Plan
Client	Mr & Mrs J. & K.
Design	Mr & Mrs J. & K.
Drawn	Mr & Mrs J. & K.
Checked	Mr & Mrs J. & K.

STRIDE & SON
ARCHITECTS & BUILDERS
SOUTHDEVON HOUSE

Appendix 2 Eastergate Lane LDO



Long Acres Nursery General Site

Appendix 3

