

MINUTES of the meeting of Environment Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Wednesday, 23rd June, 2004 at 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor J.H.R. Goodwin (Chairman)
Councillor W.L.S. Bowen (Vice Chairman)

Councillors: G.W. Davis, K.G. Grumbley, P.E. Harling, T.W. Hunt, R. Mills and J.W. Newman

In attendance: Councillors J.W. Edwards, P.J. Edwards, D.J. Fleet, J.W. Hope, Mrs. R.F. Lincoln, Ms. G.A. Powell, J. Stone, W.J.S. Thomas and R.M. Wilson (Cabinet Member – Highways and Transportation)

13. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors P. J. Dauncey, Mrs. A. Gray and Miss. F. Short.

14. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor G. Lucas substituted for Councillor Mrs. A. Gray.

15. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

16. REVIEW OF THE VOLUNTARY CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE USE OF POLYTUNNELS IN HEREFORDSHIRE

The Committee considered the findings of the Polytunnel Review Working Group following the review of the Voluntary Code of Practice for the use of Poly tunnels in Herefordshire.

The Chairman reminded the Committee that Cabinet on 6th February, 2003, had adopted a Voluntary Code of Practice for the use of polytunnels and agreed that the Code be reviewed after 12 months. On 23rd January 2004, the Committee had established a Poly tunnel Review Working Group to look at the Code and agreed a scoping statement, which included the terms of reference for the review.

The Chairman of the Poly tunnel Review Working Group, Councillor T. W. Hunt, took the Committee through the report on a page by page basis and particularly highlighted the following:

- the methodology used in the review;
- the scope of concerns or questions raised and the range of evidence gathered.
- the advice received concerning the legal position, especially in relation to the 'temporary' nature of polytunnels, (section 5) and the planning position, (section 6) especially concerning the procedure for when a planning application would be required (section 6.1.7).

- that sufficiently robust statistical detail could not be established for the Working Group to draw any final conclusion on the effect on the economic and tourism sectors in the County (Sections 7.2.13 & 9.1.1);
- that despite claims by objectors, other local authorities did not seem to have the range of issues concerning polytunnels encountered in Herefordshire (Section 7.3).
- Information from DEFRA indicated that the use of polytunnels did not impact any more on soil health than soft fruit grown in open fields (Section 7.4).
- That the Working Group suggested the distance from the nearest elevation of any dwelling (currently 30 metres) be extended to 50 metres subject to the retention of the current stipulation that 'this be subject to variation of that distance by agreement with that neighbour'. He emphasised that the Review Group wished to see the encouragement of good neighbourliness and communication between grower and local resident and vice versa (Sections 7.8.1 & 9.1.4.4).
- It was proposed that in view of the constant advances in polythene technology and growing methods the Code be reviewed in 12 months (Section 7.15.6 & 9.1.5).

The Working Group Chairman thanked the public, growers and organisations who had contributed their views or comments to the review.

The principal conclusions from the review, detailed at Section 9, were that:

- A revised and strengthened Code should operate to regulate the temporary use of polytunnels
- The distance between polytunnels and the closest dwelling should be increased from 30 to 50 metres
- Farmers should, where possible, consider the use of less reflective, coloured, plastic
- Polytunnels can only be used on the same site for a maximum of two years – subject to the polythene covering being removed for at least six months in each 12-month period. Longer uses would require planning permission.
- Polythene sheeting removed from frames after use must either be stored away from public view or removed and recycled.
- Farmers proposing to use polytunnels on their land must submit a "landscape impact statement" which would inform the Council of measures taken to mitigate the impact.
- That the voluntary code be reviewed again in a year's time.

The Committee debated the report and noted that a comparison had been made with the wirescape in Hop yards, many of which had been in place for many years and had therefore weathered. It was anticipated that polytunnel hoops should over time blend in more as the metal aged. Comment was made that there should be adequate policing of the Code both in terms of enforcing the Code to ensure compliance and monitoring to ascertain statistics.

The Committee also noted that while information had been sought from other Authorities little had been received and therefore the Working Group had had to assume that those authorities had not encountered the issue of polytunnels in their areas.

The Committee further noted that the Working Group concluded that the 'siting of polytunnels be restricted to 2 years'. Reference was made to correspondence received following publication of the Group's report on the issue of the expected life of strawberry plants, (the growing period). In view of the correspondence the

Committee suggested that the Cabinet Member may wish to give further consideration to the claim that in some instances the growing period may be up to 3 years.

The Chairman referred to a letter dated 21st June from P. Keetch MP who proposed 'pressing government ministers to provide the guidance and powers which are lacking' in relation to polytunnels. The Chairman of the Working Group confirmed that little government guidance on the issue had been available (Section 6.1.3) and that the Council had made renewed efforts to bring the issue of 'temporary structures' to the government's attention (Section 7.3.9). The Cabinet Member (Environment) confirmed that he would be taking up this matter with government ministers.

The Director of Environment commented that as this was effectively the second year of operating the Code he anticipated there would be a reduction in visible plastic at certain sites as polytunnels should now start to be moved to new locations, as part of the rotation process.

The Cabinet Member (Environment) thanked the Polytunnel Review Working Group and the Committee for undertaking the review and commented that this had been an excellent example of the scrutiny review process.

RESOLVED: That subject to the Cabinet Member (Environment) giving further consideration to the growing period the conclusions contained in the Polytunnel Review Working Group report be endorsed and the report submitted to the Cabinet Member (Environment) for consideration.

The meeting ended at 11.09 a.m.

CHAIRMAN

