

6 DCCE2008/2266/F - PROPOSED ERECTION OF 14 HECTARES OF POLYTUNNELS FOR SOFT FRUIT GROWING. NEW GENERAL PURPOSE STORAGE BUILDING. ASSOCIATED HARDSTANDING AND ACCESS ROADWAYS. BALANCING POND. LAND TO THE WEST OF VELDO FARM AND EAST OF THE A465 AT NUNNINGTON, HEREFORD, HEREFORDSHIRE, HR1 3QB

For: Mr. J. Hawkins per AMS Ltd, Thingehill Court, Withington, Herefordshire, HR1 4QG

Date Received: 2 September 2008

Ward: Hagley

Grid Ref: 55248, 43675

Expiry Date: 2 December 2008

Local Member: Councillor DW Greenow

INTRODUCTION

The application was deferred at the meeting on 5 November 2008.

1. Site Description and Proposal

- 1.1 The site extends to 14 hectares located east and adjacent to the A465 and west and adjacent of Veldo Lane which is a designated Public Right of Way number WT10. Withington lies around 1.5 km to the south east, approximately 400metres north is the hamlet of Withington Marsh and 300 metres south is a group of houses forming the area known as Nunnington. Running through the site from north east to south west is a mains gas pipeline. Levels in the site adjacent to the A465 are generally flat rising increasingly eastwards towards Veldo Lane along the eastern boundary.
- 1.2 The site is enclosed to the west, north and east and south east by mature hedgerow varying in height between 2.0 and 4.0 metres interspersed with mature and semi-mature deciduous trees. The majority of the southern boundary is partly enclosed by sections of hedgerow although of a poorer quality and lower in height. Two vehicular access points currently exist, one directly off the A465 and the other directly off Veldo Lane. Public Footpath Number WT9A runs along the entire length of the northern boundary and public footpath WT9 runs along the south eastern corner of the site for approximately 120 metres then travels in a south westerly direction away from the site. An existing water course runs centrally through the site travelling from east to west. Near the access adjacent to the A465 is an old open sided dutch barn.
- 1.3 The nearest residential properties lie in the south western corner of the site with rear gardens bordering the site, in the north west corner is a detached bungalow. In the south eastern corner of the site the nearest property (Veldo Farm) lies around 80 metres from the southern edge of the site.

- 1.4 Planning permission is sought for the erection of 14 hectares of polytunnels for table top soft fruit production. The polytunnels are to be arranged in interconnecting blocks at different orientations around the site with each block enclosed by vehicular access tracks surfaced with hardcore. Each row of polytunnels measures 8.5 metres in width by 3.5 metres in height in a lowered position rising to 5.2 metres in height when fully raised. The raising and lowering is operated by winch mechanism with the purpose of optimising the growing and harvesting conditions.
- 1.5 Also proposed is the construction of a general purpose storage building to be used for the storage of machinery and equipment and the harvested crop prior to dispatch to the off-site pack house(s). The building measures 24.4 metres in length by 18.3 metres in width by 9 metres in height to the pitch of the roof constructed from steel frame clad with kingspan composite insulated cladding coloured olive green on the sides and svelte grey on the roof with a roller shutter door at each end. The building is to be sited around 50 metres from the existing access alongside the existing small Dutch barn on site.
- 1.6 The visibility from the access is to be improved through the translocation of the existing roadside hedgerow for the entire site frontage adjacent the A465 along with the formalisation of the access with appropriate radii, surfacing and width. Immediately south of the access and storage building, a holding/balancing reservoir is proposed. This is positioned in the lowest part of the site to manage surface water runoff from the polytunnels on the site as a whole with the additional ability to retain waters for re-use on site through transfer to the proposed water storage reservoir(s). The balancing reservoir is broadly triangular in shape measuring around 55 metres in length by 40 metres in width with a total capacity of around 1850 cubic metres. The reservoir will be excavated to a depth of 4 metres with the excavated earth used to form raised areas around the perimeter of the reservoir and dispersed in a hollow point within the site near the eastern boundary.
- 1.7 Two additional storage reservoirs are identified on the proposed plan but will be subject to a separate agricultural notification application if planning permission is approved for this development. Finally various areas of landscaping are proposed within and around the site. New planting along the eastern boundary and south western corner adjacent existing properties along with the reinstatement of historic hedgerows within the site and the translocation of existing roadside hedgerow along the western boundary is proposed.

2. Policies

- 2.1 Planning Policy Statement 1 - Delivering Sustainable Development
Planning Policy Statement 7 - Sustainable Development in Rural Areas
Planning Policy Statement 9 - Biodiversity and Geological Conservation
Planning Policy Statement 25 - Development and Flood Risk

2.2 Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan 2007:

S1	-	Sustainable development
S2	-	Development requirements
S4	-	Employment
S6	-	Transport
S7	-	Natural and historic heritage
S10	-	Waste

DR1	-	Design
DR2	-	Land use and activity
DR3	-	Movement
DR4	-	Environment
DR6	-	Water resources
DR7	-	Flood risk
E13	-	Agricultural and forestry development
T6	-	Walking
T8	-	Road hierarchy
LA2	-	Landscape character in areas least resilient to change
LA5	-	Protection of trees, woodlands and hedgerows
LA6	-	Landscaping schemes
NC1	-	Biodiversity and development
NC5	-	European and nationally protected species
NC8	-	Habitat creation, restoration and enhancement
ARCH1	-	Archaeological assessments and field evaluations

2.3 Supplementary Planning Guidance – Landscape Character Assessment (2004)

2.4 Supplementary Planning Document – Polytunnels

3. Planning History

3.1 No history.

4. Consultation Summary

Statutory Consultations

4.1 Natural England:

Habitat Regulations: The proposal is close to the River Lugg which is a component of the River Wye Special Area of Conservation, a European site protected under the Habitat Regulations. It is our initial consideration based on the information supplied that the table top growing system and on-site water management will minimise the risk of significant effects upon the integrity of the SAC. However, we recommend the applicants submit a more detailed assessment of the implications of the proposal against the conservation objectives of the SAC to ensure full compliance with law.

Bats: The survey information provided indicates that bats are likely to be using the site for foraging and roosting. As development will be unlikely to impact upon bats we consider that further surveys are not needed to progress the planning application. However, the granting of planning permission does not negate the need to ensure compliance with the law and further surveys may be required in order to determine whether a licence is needed.

Other considerations: The survey information provided includes recommendations for the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity on site. These recommendations should be secured through a planning condition or Section 106 Agreement. In particular the field margins and stream corridor running the length of the site should be maintained with no infringements on its existing width. The proximity of the general storage building to the stream corridor is a cause for concern. This building must not

impede the streams function as a wildlife corridor and we recommend the positioning of the building be reconsidered.

The creation of reservoirs on site provides an opportunity for habitat creation. Consideration should be given to naturalising the reservoirs in order to provide positive biodiversity enhancement in line with the requirements of Planning Policy Statment 9.

Conclusion: Overall the application shows a welcome sensitivity towards the natural environment which Natural England fully supports. However, there is currently an insufficient consideration of habitat regulations which we recommend be resolved.

4.2 Environment Agency:

Flood risk: The site area is over 5 hectares in Flood Zone 1 (low probability) where a flood risk assessment is required. The surface water strategy confirms that the proposal accommodates the green field run-off (understood to be 10 metres per second per hectare) and the 1 in 100 year rain fall event including 20% climate change allowance. This has been achieved though the proposed balancing pond at the lowest point within the site. However, achieving the existing run-off rate depends upon a pumping system being in place to take excess water from the pond with an overflow chamber discharging back in to the watercourse if the pumping fails for any reason. This risk has been considered with uncontrolled discharge primarily affecting the applicants fields before potentially discharging across the highway (A465). The capacity of the highway culvert will determine the potential flood risk to third parties. Further information should be sought to confirm how the scheme is to be maintained to ensure it will be operational and functional for the lifetime of the development along with a condition relating to the surface water management.

Water Resources: We recognise that the water resource assessment confirms that there will be no increase in abstraction from the River Lugg compared with the current situation. The applicants also explain that a portion of the abstraction volume can be moved from direct irrigation from the River Lugg to storage irrigation, which is a benefit. We support the proposed management of water which will direct surface water run-off to the balancing pond for re-use in the system.

4.3 Welsh Water:

A water supply can be made available to serve this proposed development. The developer may be required to contribute towards the provision of new off-site and/or on-site water mains and associated infrastructure.

4.4 Ramblers Association:

The development does not appear to have any impact upon adjacent Rights of Way Withington WT9 and WT9A. However, we ask that the developer is aware that there is a legal requirement to maintain and keep clear the Public Rights of Way at all times.

4.5 River Lugg Internal Drainage Board:

Comments awaited.

4.6 Open Spaces Society:

No comments received.

4.7 Transco Gas:

No comments received.

4.8 Health and Safety Executive:

The proposed development is within the consultation distance for a major hazard pipeline but the HSE does not advise on safety grounds against the granting of planning permission in this case. The pipeline operator should be consulted on the application.

Internal Council Advice**4.9 Traffic Manager:**

The visibility of 4.5 metres by 160 metres proposed is acceptable for this length of road which is subject to a 50mph limit, and taking into account the type of vehicles which will be using the access. The proposal for provision of a minibus for shopping trips should be conditioned or incorporated into a travel plan. No Section 106 contributions are required. Recommend approval subject to conditions concerning the construction of the new access and parking and turning areas.

4.10 Public Rights of Way Manager:

The proposed development will affect the use and enjoyment of public footpaths WT9 and WT9A which pass along the northern and eastern/south eastern boundaries of the site.

Footpath WT9A: It appears the ease of walking along footpath WT9A will be improved by the development. The path is currently lightly used and is rather overgrown. Details should be sought to ensure the width of the new roadway running along the footpath is sufficient for large farm vehicles to safely pass two people walking side by side. In addition, pedestrian access to the new road surface from the existing gap in the hedge on the A465 should be confirmed to ensure compliance with Unitary Development Plan Policies T6 and DR3. The potential to remove two stiles should also be explored so the path becomes accessible to more people than at present.

Footpath WT9: The footpath cuts across the proposed landscaped area and this alignment is not correctly shown on the plan. The polytunnels will not interfere with the use of the path but any landscaping and planting should ensure that a clear width of 2 metres can be maintained for use by the public along the legal line of the path. A detailed plan showing the landscaping and legal line of the path should be submitted for approval.

The views from both footpaths will be affected by the proposals, however the separation of 8 metres between polytunnels and footpaths is relatively generous. Existing views in any event are somewhat limited as the site and surrounding areas are quite level.

The Public Rights of Way Manager has no objections to this application but requests the above points are addressed prior to approval or subject to a later approval.

4.11 Land Drainage Engineer:

The system is set to achieve total discharge of 10 metres per second per hectare across the covered area. However, there is concern that this could exceed the existing greenfield run-off rate for the site. A bypass system must be designed to accommodate and deal with all the additional flows the system will not be able to store or pump in order to reduce the possibility of flooding down stream. The proposal also depends on the pump system which could create problems if the pump fails. These matters can be dealt with by condition as stated by the Environment Agency.

4.12 Conservation Manager - Landscape:

Firstly, the application has attempted to assess the possible impact of the development on the surrounding landscape and recognises the inherent value in the landscape. Whilst the method of assessing the potential impact of the development on the landscape does not follow recognised methods (*Guidelines for landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (2nd ed.)*, *The Landscape Institute & Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment, 2002*), I am satisfied that the findings of the assessment are a fair representation of the impact of the proposed development.

The landscape assessment correctly identifies the development site as located within a landscape type, defined by the Herefordshire Landscape Character Assessment, as '*Principal Settled Farmlands*'. The description of the nature and character of the site and surroundings is accurate and fair.

A number of viewpoints, principally within and immediately around the site have been assessed and provide a fair picture of the development site. Longer distance views have also been assessed and although the depth of assessment is limited, it again provides a fair assessment of the impact of the development on the wider landscape. Assessment of the impact of development on adjacent public rights of way has also been assessed.

It is acknowledged that the translocation of the boundary hedgerow to the west of the site will result in an initial degree of exposure, I am satisfied that, subject to detail specification and careful on site operations, a large mature hedgerow will be quickly re-established.

I remain concerned as to the extent of polytunnels to the east side of the site and their potential visibility and would recommend that the final location of structures be further to the west.

The proposed landscaping is welcomed both as mitigation against identified visual impact and as a partial restoration of some lost landscape elements. However, and as discussed with the applicants, more substantial blocks of tree planting are required at strategic locations around the site. The retention of the central hedgerow and wildlife corridor and accompanying 'buffer zones' is particularly note-worthy.

In brief I would concur with the conclusions of the landscape assessment; that there will be an inevitable change in the landscape through the introduction of polytunnels, but that existing elements in the landscape and additional landscaping will mitigate any negative impact. It is the case that this landscape has the capacity to accommodate a degree of change. That the proposed development remains closely associated with agriculture – the predominant element in the landscape – and is based on a 'field scale', results in easier assimilation than some lesser developments.

4.13 Conservation Manager - Ecology:

An 'appropriate assessment' would not be necessary for two main reasons; one, the distance of the site from the protected feature and, two, when considering that the proposed operations would not be a huge departure from its current agricultural use. Herbicide, pesticide and fertiliser pollution would be the most likely impacts arising from the proposed development and these would not differ from an other intensive agricultural operation. The only difference being the change in water management and we are satisfied that, through the use of a balancing lagoon there will be little change in run-off.

More generally the proposals retain the existing features of ecological interest and introduce buffers and new habitats to the site. This could be seen as a marked improvement on the ecological content under the current intensive arable management. The translocation of the hedgerow to the frontage must be carried out to the highest standards to ensure the survival of the mature plants, but will not result in the permanent loss of important habitat.

4.14 Conservation Manager - Archaeology:

The archaeological evaluation has not revealed any archaeological interest in the site and therefore we have no objections or other requirements.

4.15 Minerals and Waste Officer:

No comments received.

5. Representations

5.1 Withington Parish Council:

The Parish Council (PC) is very supportive of the economic objectives of the proposal. However, on the basis of the information provided at present it is unable to support the development. The most significant concerns are the visual impact and the provision of temporary workers.

Landscape and Visual Impact: Whilst the PC is pleased that the applicant has addressed the issue and many of the proposed improvements to the boundaries will be useful, we do not believe that the scheme meets the objectives set out in the Council's Polytunnel SPD. Photographs have been provided for the site but they have not shown the structure superimposed. At a height of up to 5.2 metres the tunnels will be visible in many places. In addition, photos have been taken during the summer when boundary trees and hedges are in full leaf. As the structures are permanent the covering will remain in place during winter months when screening will be severely reduced.

The applicant rightly comments that the fields have been used recently for soft fruit production without serious impact on the landscape. The plastic on temporary tunnels can be removed during the winter and are generally low in height. They are therefore less intrusive.

In Section 3 on discussing Public Rights of Way the applicant proposes to replant missing areas of hedgerow. Whilst this may indeed mitigate the impact, it hardly addresses the issue as the plastic will almost certainly be above the hedge line. The PC fears that all tunnels covered throughout the year will be visually intrusive in the Herefordshire countryside.

Provision for Temporary Workers: Very little detail is provided for the provision of 80 odd seasonal workers. The PC has been informed that the Planning Department advised the applicant not to submit details of the accommodation requirements for seasonal workers. As this is likely to have a major impact on parts of the parish the PC considers that these details must be an essential consideration. Without the seasonal workers the scheme cannot be progressed. It is not clear what areas are to be allocated for workers accommodation and the PC is also concerned with the movement of workers as there is no footway on the A465 which workers are likely to use to reach the bus and Cross Keys Public House.

Transport through the Village: The applicants indicate that the site has no transport impact on the village of Withington. However, one of the economic benefits is the ability to use staff and presumably their transport from the turf business. This business consistently runs its lorries through the centre of the village rather than taking the longer detour around the A roads. We suggest an operating constraint similar to one successfully imposed on the applicants chicken venture is applied.

Footpaths: Whilst the PC is sure that the applicant intends to allow access over the Rights of Way, experience elsewhere where footpaths run alongside fruit production suggests that much disruption is inevitable. To deal with this and help to enhance the infrastructure and identify the precise alignment the PC suggests the applicant fences off the footpaths where they run alongside the site. Clearly there would then be a need to agree to maintain them. If this were undertaken it might encourage workers to use this route to reach Veldo Lane, bus and pub.

Planting: The scheme involves considerable amount of planting to reduce the impact of the tunnels. Unfortunately, given the height of the tunnels, it is likely to be many years before growth is sufficient to create screening. Notwithstanding the PC's general objections concerning visual impact it is suggested that, particularly close to houses, more mature planting is applied and an increase is made to the proposed 30 metre gap.

Field Margins: The Ecological Report recommends that a 4 - 6 metre grass margin is provided on field boundaries. Given the hardcore roads around the site it does not appear that this recommendation has been adopted.

5.2 Neighbouring Parish Council - Sutton St Nicholas:

The Parish Council generally supports this application but is concerned that adequate provision is made for safe access for heavy goods and slow agricultural vehicles on the main road. Plans as submitted seem to indicate a narrow and confined entry. The Parish Council would also like to see that the screening proposals are fully carried through.

5.3 Eleven letters and e-mails of objection have been received. The main points raised are:

1. The development will be a huge blight on the relatively unspoilt corner of the county.
2. Even with screening and planting it will be a considerable time (if ever) before the 5.2 metre high polytunnels may be screened.
3. The extent of hardstanding for roadways and accommodation will be like having a small industrial estate in the hamlet.
4. The access is in a dangerous section on an already busy road where there have been several accidents.
5. The introduction of 90 workers in to the area would effectively double the population of the hamlet of Nunnington.
6. The area has little infrastructure, no regular bus service, no pavement and the nearest amenities are over a mile away.
7. The development will lead to increased noise and light pollution.
8. The development will lead to fear over security with workers walking past previously isolated properties.
9. The workers accommodation should be sited elsewhere within the applicants holding.

10. The table top production of fruit is an industrial rather than agricultural use of land.
11. This section of the A465 adjacent to the site flooded in 2007 partly contributed by run-off from the application site. The development will increase flood risk to the road and nearby properties.
12. The northern perimeter hedge line will barely screen the development from the hamlet of Cross Keys to the north thereby blighting the outlook of several properties.
13. The site will be very exposed when the roadside hedge is removed in its entirety.
14. The notification letters did not make clear the scale of the polytunnels or the seasonal workers accommodation on site.
15. The development will reduce existing private water supplies and potentially cause pollution through the release of pesticides and fertiliser into existing ground water.
16. The development does not promote or reinforce the character and appearance of the locality in terms of layout, scale, mass nor does it respect the context of the site.
17. No consideration has been given to adjacent biodiversity which includes newts, frogs, toads, grass snakes, lizard, butterflies, dragonflies, damsel flies, spiders, foxes, bats, skylarks, woodpeckers, herons, bullfinches, barn owls, various bird species and other flora.
18. Only five full time jobs will be created and the other 90 will be temporary part time jobs.
19. The development will damage local tourism.
20. The development will devalue local properties.
21. The previous use of the site for polytunnels was on a considerably smaller area with no other physical development or workers accommodation and the polytunnels were temporary and seasonal.
22. The polytunnels in the raised position are the height of a two storey house.
23. The development will damage scenic views from the use of the footpaths around the site.
24. The seasonal workforce are generally paid lower than minimum wage following reductions for accommodation and therefore the benefit to the local economy will not be significant.
25. Permission should be temporary for no more than 5 years to allow the impact of the development to be reviewed.
26. Insufficient toilet facilities are proposed leading to risk of workers using localised footpaths and hedgerows as toilet facilities.
27. An on-site shop would be beneficial and could be used by local residents.
28. The development would lead to increased litter in the area.
29. If permission is approved provision should be made to prevent mud being carried on to the road.
30. The major excavations to create reservoirs will destroy local eco systems both within and adjoining the site.

5.4 Fifteen letters of support have been received the main points raised are:

1. The increased labour force will help support local amenities within the villages and create new employment opportunities for local people.
2. The proposed screening will minimise the impact on neighbours.
3. The surface water management will ensure the impact on the environment is minimised.
4. The development will indirectly benefit a number of local businesses which is particularly important in the current economic climate.

5. The scheme is well thought out and proposes improvements that will enhance the ecology of the site.
6. The growing and promotion of local produce is the best way to protect local farming heritage.

The majority of letters of support are from businesses in the locality and local industrial estates in Hereford, Ledbury and Bromyard.

- 5.5 In support of the proposal the applicants have provided a number of technical reports covering the following:

1. Design and Access Statement and associated supporting documents
2. Economic Impact Assessment
3. Transport and Access Statement
4. Surface Water Strategy
5. Ecological Survey and a separate Reptile Survey
6. Landscape and Visual Assessment
7. Statement of Community Involvement

The contents of these reports will be considered and referred to in the Officer's Appraisal.

- 5.6 The full text of these letters can be inspected at Central Planning Services, Garrick House, Widemarsh Street, Hereford and prior to the Sub-Committee meeting.

6. Officer's Appraisal

- 6.1 The application proposes the erection of 14 hectares of permanent polytunnels to be used as table top production of soft fruit along with the construction of a general purpose storage building, surface water balancing reservoir, improvements to the vehicular access and associated hardstanding roads, vehicle turning area and general landscaping. The main issues in the consideration of this application are:

1. The impact of the development on the character and appearance of the landscape including the setting of the nearby settlements of Cross Keys and Nunnington.
2. The economic considerations.
3. Flood risk and surface water drainage.
4. Highway and transportation considerations.
5. Biodiversity.
6. Other matters including on-site workers accommodation and residential amenity considerations.

Impact on the character and appearance of the landscape

- 6.2 The site and the surrounding landscape does not form part of any national landscape designation. A more specific definition of the landscape character of the site and surrounding area can therefore be found in the Council's Landscape Character Assessment. This defines the landscape character as Principal Settled Farmlands which is the predominant landscape type in the lowland areas of Central Herefordshire. The key elements of this landscape type is that it has a more domestic character comprising mixed agricultural land use of grazed pasture, arable crops and orchards interspersed with winding roads and high field margin hedges. Woodland areas are largely limited to alongside water courses.

- 6.3 The landscape character has deteriorated over the last century as a result of more intensive agricultural practices particularly arable, changing the historic field patterns through the removal of hedges. The primary aim for this landscape type is to conserve and enhance small to medium scaled field pattern, hedgerows and field pasture, conserve and enhance tree cover and wetland habitats along water courses and generally maintain the balance of arable and pastoral land use. This landscape character assessment indicates that this landscape type can accommodate some change.
- 6.4 The proposed site falls relatively neatly within this landscape type and the features that make up its character. The site is largely enclosed by mature hedgerows with the most recent land use being more intensive agricultural practices including arable, turf production and polytunnels. No woodland exists within or around the site but modest groups of trees can be seen along the existing water course centrally within the site and the perimeter field boundaries. The historic field sizes and shapes have changed through the removal of hedgerows at some stage in the past. Therefore, whilst the quality of the landscape within the application site has been somewhat eroded historically, it retains a number of the key attributes that contribute to the landscape character of the wider area.
- 6.5 The development of the majority of the site with polytunnels of any form will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the landscape due to the land take up, design and materials. This impact will be further exacerbated by the height of the polytunnels rising from 3.5 metres to 5.2 metres when fully raised. The height of the polytunnels will increase throughout the season starting in the lowest position in April rising to the highest in late summer/early Autumn dependent upon the atmospheric conditions. The season being April to October. The application also proposes permanent polytunnels and furthermore, the applicants advise that 30% to 40% of the polytunnel covers will remain for twelve months a year in the lower parts of the site to be used as a nursery for new plants outside the main growing season. Ground levels also rise within the site from west to east resulting at least 50% of the site and associated polytunnels being in an increasingly elevated position further increasing their prominence. This height of the polytunnels and elevated nature of parts of the site is a concern.
- 6.6 These factors must be balanced against the existing screening and the proposed landscaping. The site is largely enclosed to the north, east and west by mature hedgerow ranging in height from 2.5 to 4 metres. Although the roadside hedgerow is proposed to be removed to improve the visibility from the access, the proposals are for this hedgerow to be translocated to inside of the new visibility line which can be a workable practice. There are no significant areas of trees or woodland within the site but a number of semi-mature and mature trees exist around the field within the hedgerows and along the water course. In addition a new planting area is proposed along the eastern boundary of varying width from 15-25 metres with further planting areas proposed in the south west corner of the site adjacent to existing properties. New hedgerow planting is proposed to infill gaps along the southern boundary and centrally within the site.
- 6.7 All of these elements greatly assist in screening the polytunnels at their lower height even in the winter months particularly when the additional planting matures. However, none of the existing or proposed planting will be sufficient to entirely screen the polytunnels particularly at their raised height. The existing and proposed planting will, nevertheless soften the visual impact of the polytunnels from within the site and public

- vantage points including nearby footpaths, localised highways and nearby residential properties.
- 6.8 There are limited views of the site from other public vantage points further afield, the site being largely screened both by existing landscape features within the site, surrounding topography and other natural screening in the area. The result of which is that only glimpsed views predominantly of the upper, more elevated parts of the site will be available from more the distant view points of Dinmore Hill and Lyde Hill. The planting proposed along the eastern boundary will also ensure that the polytunnels do not break the skyline. Nevertheless, the prominence of the polytunnels in the higher third (eastern) end of the site remains a concern particularly with the format of polytunnels proposed. To address this applicants have removed a further 25 metres of polytunnels away from the eastern end of the site and a reduction in height of the remaining 70 metres of polytunnels to a maximum of 4.2 metres.
- 6.9 There are no other large polytunnel developments in the area and therefore the development will not have any cumulative landscape impact alongside other developments. The polytunnels will be partially visible from the small hamlets of Cross Keys to the north and to a lesser extent (except properties adjoining the site) Nunnington to the south. However, with the additional planting proposed, the separation distances and the possibility of allowing the hedgerows to grow in height by a further metre it is not considered the development will have any harmful impact upon the setting of these hamlets although it is acknowledged that the polytunnels will be in part visible from properties within these settlements.
- 6.10 The siting of the general storage building has been amended away from the existing watercourse to alongside the existing dutch barn. The revised position will benefit from localised screening, addresses the concern of Natural England and will assist in screening the workers accommodation area. The scale of the building is commensurate with the proposed use and the materials and design are acceptable. With additional landscaping, the building will also be acceptable in landscape terms. The internal roadways will largely be concealed by existing hedgerows and the proposed polytunnels and the amended plans re-align the roadways slightly further away from the field boundaries.
- 6.11 The development will therefore have a significant impact on the landscape as a matter of fact but it is considered the landscape character of the site is tolerant to change. Moreover, the layout of the development, the existing landscape elements and proposed planting will successfully mitigate any harmful impact on the character and appearance of the landscape to an acceptable degree. This conclusion is shared by the landscape officer and is also in accordance with Guidelines 5 and 6 of the Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on Poly tunnels.

Economic Considerations

- 6.12 An Economic Impact Assessment has been provided to demonstrate what benefits the development could provide for the local economy. It is projected that the proposal could create between 5 and 10 full time jobs and up to 90 part time jobs during the peak of the season. The development would also help support the applicants other business such as turf growing which is largely seasonal and particularly the associated workforce as the seasons would not clash.

- 6.13 Table top soft fruit growing is far more productive than conventional ground based polytunnel growing producing approximately double the quantity of fruit per hectare. The design of the polytunnels which can be raised and lowered also assist in lengthening the growing season and maximising weather conditions to further improve productivity and the plants generally have greater longevity. The applicant also estimates that up to 50% of the picking and packing costs arising from the development (around £425,000) will be returned to the local community from the seasonal workforce in particular through shopping and leisure pursuits. In addition will be the initial capital investment of around 1.4 million and the applicant is seeking to use local suppliers for, along with other services and consumables once the development is set up which again the applicants state will be sourced locally.
- 6.14 Whilst the applicants economic assessment has not been independently scrutinised, there is no doubt that the development will generate economic benefits in terms of both job creation and localised spending on goods and services needed to support the development. Furthermore, the intensive use of the site as proposed compared to all other forms of agricultural production including the existing use of the site for turf growing and arable achieves significantly greater economic returns. The gross value added for the arable use of the site is in the region of £18,375 compared to £1.9 million for the proposed development and a direct job creation of 0.1 person compared with around 95 for the proposed development.
- 6.15 The development will also help achieve wider sustainability objectives in producing large quantities for quality soft fruit in the County, not only helping to sustain the agricultural industry but also reducing the need for imports thereby reducing food miles. The more intensive growing methods proposed in this application also assists in meeting the demands of the buyers (supermarkets) and ultimately the consumer in bringing the required quantity of fresh produce directly and swiftly to the markets. It is therefore accepted that the development will make a positive contribution to the rural economy which, in accordance with Guideline 1 of the SPD, is a matter which can be given considerable weight in the assessment of the application. The number of local businesses whose services the applicants currently utilise and have written in support of the application is further evidence of the direct and indirect economic benefits of the development.

Flood risk and surface water drainage

- 6.16 The applicants propose to capture surface water run-off to irrigate the development with any additional supply obtained from the River Lugg. Surface water run-off from the polytunnels will be captured and channelled to a balancing/holding reservoir at the lowest point of the site adjacent the A465. The rainwater held in this reservoir will then be pumped back up to a storage reservoir (subject of a separate application) located centrally within the site along the southern boundary. This will then be used to irrigate the crops through a trickle irrigation system. The rainwater is harvested through French drains every 50 metres which then link to a larger drain running to the balancing reservoir. The main storage reservoir will also be used to capture rainwater during the winter months from run-off on and off site.
- 6.17 With table top production the grass cover can be maintained across the site. This assists in controlling direct run-off flows and prevents soil erosion, which is a common problem with ground based soft fruit production. It also ensures that the water is cleaner having not been contaminated with soil particles and therefore is more acceptable for recycling for irrigation purposes. The projections indicate that the

development as a whole at the end of a two year growing cycle would give an annual water requirement of 42,000 cubic metres. This figure has informed the required size of the balancing and storage reservoirs. Based on these projections, it is likely that sufficient water will be provided through surface water harvesting to serve the development. However, this is clearly dependent upon the extent of rainfall. The site also has access to water from the River Lugg where a pump is situated and was used to irrigate the crop production on the site from the year 2000. This therefore will be used as a back-up facility in the event that insufficient rainfall exists.

- 6.18 The system will also assist in reducing the risk of localised flooding arising from increased surface water run-off from the development with the run-off being maintained at the existing green field run-off of 10 litres per second per hectare, which the Environment Agency and the Council's Drainage Engineer confirm is acceptable. Notwithstanding this, the risk of flooding must be considered and factored into the scheme. The overflow chamber for the holding reservoir connects into the existing 50mm culvert passing from the site under the A465 through to an open ditch with eventual outfall into the River Lugg. The balancing pond is positioned and constructed below the existing ground level to overcome a breach scenario. If the overflow culvert also fails excess water will then flow to the surrounding fields. There is then the risk that this could cause severe floods and subsequently cause flood risk to the highway and even localised property but the scheme has been designed to ensure the development will not increase this risk.
- 6.19 The sustainable re-use of water is welcomed thereby avoiding any direct impact on existing water courses or supplies. Both the surface water drainage strategy and potential flood risk have been considered acceptable by the Environment Agency and the Council's Drainage Engineer. These elements are also in accordance with Guidelines 18 and 19 of the SPD

Highway and Transportation Considerations

- 6.20 The development will be served by the existing vehicular access, which enters on to the A465 relatively centrally along the western boundary of the site. However, the access is severely sub-standard in terms of visibility and general design and therefore the proposals are to improve the safety of the access up to the required standard for the speed limit, which in this instance is 50mph. This entails the removal of hedgerow for the entire roadside frontage and its translocation behind the new visibility splay. The new access will be slightly widened with a new junction radii constructed to ensure that vehicles including HGVs can enter and leave the site safely and simultaneously. Subject to the success of the translocation of the hedge, these works will significantly improve the safety of the access. The applicant can then be required to close the existing vehicular access off Veldo Lane at the eastern end of the site. This will ensure that there is no temptation to access the site from the east where the general road network is of a poorer standard.
- 6.21 The Traffic Manager is also satisfied that the localised road network has sufficient capacity to accommodate the potential increase in traffic associated with the development. The traffic generation is unlikely to be significant following the initial site set-up particularly with the resident workforce and on site storage facilities proposed. With regards the shopping and leisure needs of the workers residing on site, a minibus service is proposed as there is no bus stop within safe walking distance of the site. The Traffic Manager is satisfied with this procedure, which can be conditioned as part of a Travel Plan for the development as a whole. There is also a direct public footpath

link to Withington around 1.3km away where there is a shop. This is not an unreasonable distance to walk.

- 6.22 Within the site an area of hardstanding is proposed around the general storage building both for parking of vehicles and manoeuvring of HGVs. Around the entire perimeter of the site and various points within the site a 3.5 metre wide gravelled access road is proposed to allow adequate servicing of the site.
- 6.23 Whilst the location of the site could not be classed a sustainable in terms of its accessibility to alternative modes of transport, the needs of the workers residing on site can be satisfied through a robust Travel Plan and other highway considerations are acceptable in accordance with Guideline 10 of the SPD.

Ecology and Biodiversity

- 6.24 A general Ecological Survey of the site as a whole was carried out this summer focusing primarily on the field margins as the majority of the remainder of the site is set to cultivated arable land. This included an extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey to establish the presence of any protected species and local biodiversity action plan species along with the identification of features and habitats capable of supporting such species. A more focused and specific reptile survey has also been carried out on the site of the balancing pond and the length of the water course running centrally through the site. The specific reptile survey followed on from the recommendations of the principal ecological survey for the site as a whole, which identified what further specific protected species surveys were required.
- 6.25 The surveys have not revealed the need for any specific mitigation strategy for flora and fauna within the site. It does however make a number of recommendations to retain the existing biodiversity interests within the site and particularly around the perimeter of the site with opportunities to enhance where possible. In summary, the report recommends wider unmanaged margins of around 6 metres around the perimeter of the site and the water course feature within the site would help support species such as barn owls, field vole, bats, various bird species and reptiles. There is then also scope for enhancement through the management of the existing pond within the site (dry during the summer), the creation of a new small pond (not for any irrigation purposes), advice on the construction of the new reservoirs to encourage flora and fauna along with the location and species for new planting.
- 6.26 Natural England also do not raise any objections to the application but query whether an Appropriate Assessment of the impact of the development on the River Wye which is designated as a Special Area of Conservation is required. The only impact on the SAC is likely to be as a result of overflow discharge from the holding reservoir, which will eventually travel westwards approximately 2 kilometres on entering the River Lugg, which subsequently enters the River Wye. It is therefore not considered that an appropriate assessment under the Habitat Regulations will be required.
- 6.27 Whilst the development will particularly in the early years undoubtedly have an impact on the biodiversity of the site and surrounding area, with the implementation of the recommendations of the Ecological Report along with the additional planting proposed, the biodiversity interest of the site will be restored and potentially enhanced as required by Guidelines 20 and 21 of the SPD.

Other Matters

On-site Workers Accommodation:

- 6.28 The applicant advises that at its peak, the development will generate the need for up to 90 workers most probably employed on a seasonal basis. It is normal practice with fruit farms for such workers to be accommodated on or near the site. The applicants have identified an area of hardstanding that would accommodate around 14 mobile homes on a seasonal basis and have provide a possible layout plan. The siting of mobile homes in connection with a particular season is permitted development under Part 5 Schedule 2 of The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 providing it does not amount to a permanent change of use of the land by virtue of other operational development. As such, the mobile homes themselves are unlikely to require planning permission providing they are seasonal but the hardstanding and its use for the siting of mobile homes will require planning permission.
- 6.29 In terms of this application, the workers accommodation will form part of a separate application as the applicants are seeking the hardstanding and mobile homes to remain on site outside of the growing season. Other facilities will also be required such as a toilet and shower block. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to consider the impact of the mobile homes which will inevitably be required and has been raised as an issue of concern by a number of objectors.
- 6.30 The siting of the mobile homes will be up against existing semi-mature trees alongside the watercourse and largely be against the backdrop of this vegetation and screened by existing hedgerows. Therefore, subject to the mobile homes being finished with appropriate colour and satisfactory drainage arrangements installed, they are not considered to have a harmful impact on the site or wider landscape in the overall context of the development. The accessibility to services and amenities for the on-site workers is already been covered in Para 6.21.

Residential Amenity:

- 6.31 The introduction of a significant number of residents where no such use currently exists will inevitably also generate increased noise potentially impacting upon the amenity of nearby properties. The nearest property to the site for the mobile homes is 130 metres, the next nearest being 230 metres. Whilst noise from the site generally and mobile home area specifically may be audible from these and other local properties, subject to controls over the management of this accommodation and the playing of music and extent of lighting, it is considered that sufficient separation distance exists so as not to have any harmful impact on the amenity of nearby properties. This being a requirement of Guideline 13 and 14 of the SPD.
- 6.32 The layout of the site also ensures that there are generally no polytunnels positioned within 50 metres of an existing dwelling or 30 metres of the curtilage of a dwelling. This being in line with the requirements of Guideline 15 and 16 of the Draft SPD. In addition, in more sensitive areas additional planting is proposed to provide a further natural buffer between the proposed polytunnels and nearby residential properties to soften (not obscure) the impact of the polytunnels on the outlook from existing dwellings. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the outlook from a number of nearby properties will be affected by the proposed development.

Public Rights of Way:

- 6.33 Public Rights of Way No. WT9A runs along the entire length of the northern boundary of the site along with Footpath WT9 along the east and south eastern boundary. The polytunnels and perimeter access roads have been stepped away from the boundaries to ensure there is no direct impact on the definitive route and usability of these footpaths. However, the recreational value of these footpaths will to some extent be affected by the proposal. The existing footpaths are not presently, particularly well used and are largely overgrown. This application therefore provides the opportunity to secure the improvements to the localised Public Rights of Way network to ensure they are more useable for both walkers and workers who wish to travel to and from the site. This matter can be controlled by condition.

Tourism:

- 6.34 Whilst the erection of polytunnels is a controversial issue within the County, proportionately little of the County is covered with them. The Council's Tourism Section advise that there is no evidence to support the view that the growth in the number of polytunnels has led to a decline in tourists staying within the County and visiting its attractions.

Conclusion

- 6.35 The development will undoubtedly have a significant localised impact on the appearance and character of the landscape and in the view of the objectors and Withington Parish Council this impact will be harmful. Due to the scale of the polytunnels in terms of their height, it is unlikely to be possible to entirely screen the development and therefore if the principle of the development is accepted the polytunnels will always be visible potentially throughout the year. Opportunities however exist through the management of existing landscape features and boundary hedgerows along with additional planting to reduce the direct impact of the development on the application site along with the secondary impact of long distance views of the site from elsewhere. The impact must also be considered in the context of the landscape character assessment which identifies this landscape type (Principal Settled Farmlands) as being able to accommodate some new development subject to key features being retained and enhanced. The comments of the Landscape Officer are also noteworthy in this regard where ultimately, no objection is raised.
- 6.36 The landscape impact must also be considered alongside the likely economic benefits of the development in terms of job and wealth creation. Alongside this the added benefit the development will provide in enabling the production of increased quantities of quality soft fruit thereby reducing food miles are matters that can also be given weight in the assessment of the application.
- 6.37 Therefore, although finely balanced, the landscape impact is acceptable in light of the requested amendments and additional mitigation being adopted and balanced against the benefits to the rural economy. The other matters including surface water drainage, flood risk, impact on biodiversity, highway safety, residential amenity, archaeology and water uses have all been adequately addressed in the supporting information with the application and can be controlled through conditions. Having regard to the relevant Unitary Development Plan Policies and guidance within the Draft Supplementary Planning Document on Polytunnels, the proposed development is therefore considered acceptable.

RECOMMENDATION

That planning permission be granted subject to the following conditions and any further conditions considered necessary by officers.

1. **A01 (Time limit for commencement (full permission)).**

Reason: Required to be imposed by Section 91 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

2. **E03 (Site observation - archaeology).**

Reason: To allow the potential archaeological interest of the site to be investigated and recorded and to comply with the requirements of Policy ARCH6 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

3. **G10 (Landscaping scheme).**

Reason: In order to maintain the visual amenities of the area and to conform with Policy LA6 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

4. **G11 (Landscaping scheme - implementation).**

Reason: In order to maintain the visual amenities of the area and to comply with Policy LA6 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

5. **G14 (Landscape management plan).**

Reason: In order to maintain the visual amenity of the area and to comply with Policy LA6 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

6. **G02 (Retention of trees and hedgerows).**

Reason: To safeguard the amenity of the area and to ensure that the development conforms with Policy DR1 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

7. **H03 (Visibility splays).**

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and to conform with the requirements of Policy DR3 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

8. **H05 (Access gates).**

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and to conform with the requirements of Policy DR3 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

9. **H06 (Vehicular access construction).**

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and to conform with the requirements of Policy DR3 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

10. **H13 (Access, turning area and parking).**

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and to ensure the free flow of traffic using the adjoining highway and to conform with the requirements of Policy T11 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

11. H21 (Wheel washing).

Reason: To ensure that the wheels of vehicles are cleaned before leaving the site in the interests of highway safety and to conform with the requirements of Policy DR3 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

12. H29 (Secure covered cycle parking provision).

Reason: To ensure that there is adequate provision for secure cycle accommodation within the application site, encouraging alternative modes of transport in accordance with both local and national planning policy and to conform with the requirements of Policy DR3 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

13. H30 (Travel plans).

Reason: In order to ensure that the development is carried out in combination with a scheme aimed at promoting the use of a range of sustainable transport initiatives and to conform with the requirements of Policy DR3 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

14. I14 (Time restriction on music).

Reason: In order to protect the amenity of occupiers of nearby properties and to comply with Policy DR13 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

15. Surface water generated from the site shall be limited to the equivalent Greenfield run-off rate for the site with storage attenuation provided to cater for the 1% plus climate change (20% peak rainfall event) or greater, in accordance with the 'Surface Water Strategy' dated 2008 including 'run-off calculations'. The surface water run-off shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details, unless otherwise agreed in writing by the local planning authority.

Reason: To prevent the increased risk of flooding and ensure the provision of a satisfactory means of surface water disposal.

16. I33 (External lighting).

Reason: To safeguard the character and amenities of the area and to comply with Policy DR14 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

17. I41 (Scheme of refuse storage (commercial)).

Reason: In the interests of amenity and to comply with Policy DR4 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

18. I55 (Site Waste Management).

Reason: In the interests of pollution prevention and efficient waste minimisation and management so as to comply with Policies S10 and DR4 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

19. K4 (Nature Conservation - Implementation).

Reason: To ensure that all species are protected having regard to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c) Regulations 1994 (as amended) and Policies NC1, NC5, NC6 and NC7 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

20. No development shall commence until a scheme for the enhancement and future maintenance of the existing Public Rights of Way Nos. WT9 and WT9A and WT10 adjacent to and within the locality of the application has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. A scheme of enhancement shall be completed prior to first use of the polytunnels hereby permitted.

Reason: To ensure the useability of nearby Public Rights of Way are enhanced in accordance with the requirements of Policy T6 of the Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

21. H08 (Access closure).

Reason: To ensure the safe and free flow of traffic using the adjoining County highway and to conform with the requirements of Policy DR3 of Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

22. In the event of the polytunnels hereby permitted becoming redundant for the growing of soft fruit on the application site, the polytunnels including the supporting structures shall be permanently removed from the application site within a period of 6 months.

Reason: To ensure the polytunnels that are redundant for agricultural purposes do not remain in the landscape unnecessarily.

23. Prior to the commencement of the development, a scaled plan shall be submitted for the approval in writing of the local planning authority identifying the area of polytunnels where the covering will remain permanently in place. The covering shall be removed outside of the growing season in all other areas.

Reason: To minimise the landscape impact of the development during the winter months and to comply with policy LA6 of the Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

Informatives:

- 1. HN05 - Works within the highway.**
- 2. HN10 - No drainage to discharge to highway.**
- 3. HN25 - Travel Plans.**
- 4. N15 - Reason(s) for the Grant of PP/LBC/CAC.**

5. N19 - Avoidance of doubt - Approved Plans.

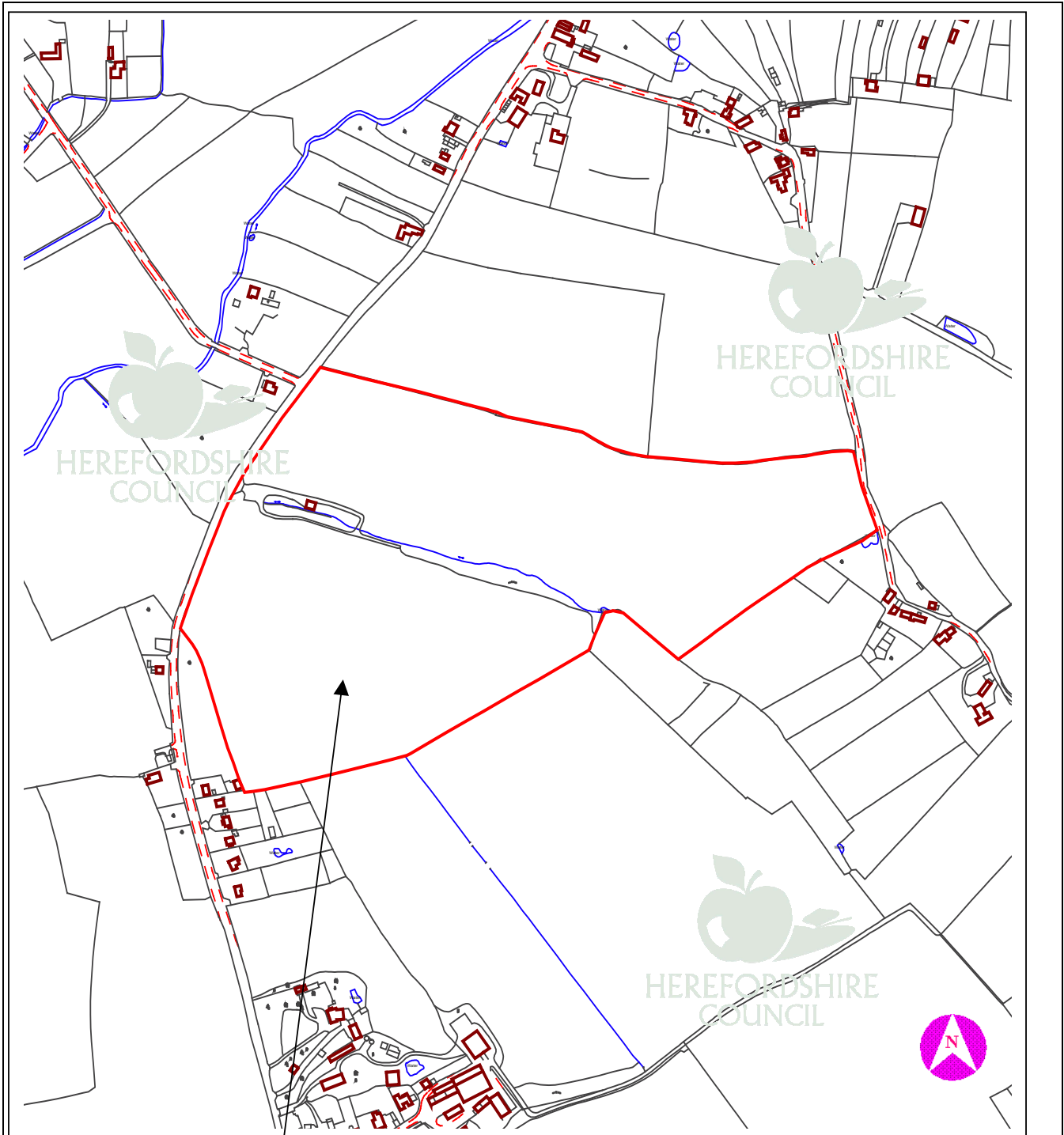
Decision:

Notes:

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Background Papers

Internal departmental consultation replies.



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APPLICATION NO: DCCE2008/2266/F

SCALE : 1 : 5846

SITE ADDRESS : Land to the West of Veldo Farm and East of the A465 at Nunnington, Hereford, Herefordshire HR1 3QB

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