

8 DCSE0009/0944/F - ERECTION OF FIXED, PERMANENT STEEL FRAMED, POLYTHENE-SKINNED SPANISH POLYTUNNELS (9900 SQUARE METRES GROSS AREA APPROXIMATELY) AS PLANT NURSERY/PROPAGATION HOUSES, LAND ADJACENT TO COLERAINE BUILDINGS, COUGHTON, ROSS-ON-WYE, HEREFORDSHIRE, HR9 5SG.

For: Cobrey Farms per Antony Aspbury Associates, 20 Park Lane Business Centre, Park Lane, Basford, Nottingham, NG6 0DW.

Date Received: 18 May 2009

Ward: Kerne Bridge

Grid Ref: 61724, 21928

Expiry Date: 17 August 2009

Local Member: Councillor JG Jarvis

1. Site Description and Proposal

- 1.1 The application seeks planning permission for the retention of 0.99 hectares of permanent Spanish polytunnels on land immediately to the north-east of the Coleraine Farm complex, the operational centre of Cobrey Farms Ltd. The application site amounts to 1.4 hectares in total, of which marginally under one hectare would be covered with clear polythene tunnels. The site is located in the valley bottom of the Castle Brook, adjacent to and within the same visual envelope as the farm buildings. The polytunnels are required as a result of the commercial decision to diversify into blueberry growing, with the polytunnels providing a plant nursery and propagation facility.
- 1.2 The Design and Access Statement states that the site has been chosen having regard to its proximity and ease of accessibility from the main farmstead, which reduces the time and distance of travel by management and staff and facilitates the necessary security and plant care. It is also considered to minimise the visual impact of the proposal by concentrating the development in one discrete area.
- 1.3 The polytunnels consist of a tubular steel, galvanised framework made up of either single arm of 'Y'-shaped legs of 1.5 to 2m length with fluted ends, which are wound into the ground mechanically to a depth of 0.5 to 0.75m so that 1 to 1.5 metres projects above the ground. Semi-circular hoops are slotted into place over the legs and thus form individual free-standing blocks of tunnels which are then tied together with bracing bars to secure the first and last hoops. In this case the bay width varies between 7.7 and 8.5 metres and the height between 3.0 and 3.7 metres. Having regard to the intended year-round retention (the polythene will not be stripped back in the winter) heavier gauge polythene is used.

2. Policies

2.1 National Planning Guidance

PPS7 - Sustainable Development in Rural Areas

2.2 Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan

Policy S1 - Sustainable Development
Policy S2 - Development Requirements

Policy DR2	-	Land Use and Activity
Policy DR4	-	Environment
Policy DR6	-	Water Resources
Policy DR7	-	Flood Risk
Policy E12	-	Farm Diversification
Policy E13	-	Agricultural and Forestry Development

2.3 Supplementary Planning Document

Polytunnels

3. Planning History

- 3.1 DCSE2000/0387/F Permanent retention of 7 caravans. 6 used to accommodate students working on farm seasonally May to November, 1 caravan contains washing machine, drier and deep freeze - Approved with conditions. A temporary planning permission expiring on 31st December 2005 with occupation limited to between May and November of each calendar year.
- DCSE2004/3102/F Asparagus grading and packing facility together with associated lorry parking, staff amenities, access roads and hard standing - Approved 17.11.04
- DCSE2005/0042/F Relocation and extension of residential site for seasonal and casual workers together with land areas to be re-profiled - Deemed Withdrawn – Member resolved to approve the application subject to overcoming the Environment Agency's holding objection.
- DCSE2008/2581/F Change of use of land (part retrospective) from agricultural to site for seasonal agricultural workers accommodation for up to 173 caravans/mobile homes for permanent retention on site, laying out of dressed hardcore access tracks and of ancillary informal grassed recreational space on land adjacent to Coleraine Buildings, Coughton, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, HR9 5SG - Refused 14.01.09
- DCSE2009/0901/F Change of use of land (part retrospective) from agricultural to site for seasonal agricultural workers' accommodation for up to 173 caravans/mobile homes for permanent retention on site, including associated re-grading of the site, laying out of dressed hardcore, access tracks and of ancillary informal grassed recreational space - Undetermined – see Agenda Item 7
- DCSE2009/0945/F Erection of agricultural plant comprising irrigation water tank, pump house and banded liquid fertiliser store - Undetermined – see Agenda Item 9

4. Consultation Summary

Statutory Consultations

4.1 Environment Agency: No objection.

“The site is located within Flood Zone 1 (low probability) and is less than 1 hectare. We [the Environment Agency] would not wish to make any bespoke comments on this application. For operational developments falling within Flood Zone 1, the main flood risk issue to consider will usually be managing surface water run-off.

Advice is given as to how to manage surface water run-off, which should be addressed through sustainable drainage systems (SuDs), which aim to retain water on or near the site when rain falls, in contrast to traditional drainage approaches, which tend to pipe water off site as quickly as possible. Flood risk will normally be reduced by reducing the quantity of surface water run-off and the speed at which it reaches water courses.”

4.2 Natural England: “No objection. It is recommended that suitable conditions be imposed to ensure that the landscape and visual impact mitigation proposed by the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment are delivered and maintained.”

Internal Council Advice

4.3 Conservation Manager (Landscapes): “The site of the development is in close proximity to the existing extensive layout of the Coleraine Farm agricultural buildings. This extensive agricultural setting, which has degraded the natural landscape, combined with the location of the polytunnels low on the valley floor and near the existing farm buildings, lessens the visual intrusion of this development. Subject to the securing of the landscape mitigation measures outlined in the LVIA, the Conservation Manager (Landscapes) has no objection to the proposal.”

4.4 Conservation Manager (Ecology): “Recommends a condition seeking a wildlife enhancement strategy for the Castle Brook corridor.”

4.5 Traffic Manager: No objection.

4.6 Environmental Health Manager: No objection.

5. Representations

5.1 Walford Parish Council: “It was felt that restrictions should be put in place on the scale of polytunnels to prevent their spreading down the Coughton Valley.”

5.2 Ross Town Council: No objection.

5.3 Weston-under-Penyard Parish Council: Defers to Walford Parish Council.

5.4 Ross-on-Wye and District Civic Society: Objection. “The application is partially retrospective and could represent an unfortunate precedent for future expansion. Polytunnel cultivation adjacent to the AONB should be treated with extreme caution and the preservation of the landscape’s visual appeal should be given a very high priority. It should be noted that the polythene cover would be in place throughout the year.”

5.5 Wye Valley Society: Objection. “The proposal is contrary to Supplementary Planning Document: Polytunnels Guideline 5 in that the visual impact of the polytunnels cannot be satisfactorily mitigated. There is particular concern at the impact upon views from public footpaths. The application also fails to address the traffic generated with the development and the impact upon the local highway network.”

- 5.6 Campaign to Protect Rural England: Objection. "This application should be described as retrospective as 10 of the polytunnels have been in position since early March this year. The tunnels are unsightly, and visible from the road, high ground and the footpath WA19/RR11. The landscape mitigation measures proposed will not be sufficient to hide these glistening, permanent structures. The associated irrigation measures proposed so close to Castle Brook, are also a concern."
- 5.7 Walford Parish Residents' Association: Objection. "The polytunnels will be visually intrusive from the AONB and adjoining high ground. It is noted that the application is retrospective."
- 5.8 Wye Valley AONB Officer: "The main concern with this development is the potential for the proposed polytunnels to be detrimental to views to and from the AONB. The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment identifies the key views from within the AONB and we generally agree that this particular block of polytunnels would be quite well screened from the AONB by the farm buildings and would therefore have little detrimental impact. We would welcome any tree planting along the watercourse as it would help to screen the polytunnels and reduce their landscape impact."
- 5.9 13 letters of objection have been received. The content can be summarised as follows:
- The local highway network cannot accommodate any further agricultural development;
 - There are bound to be environmental consequences arising from the siting of polytunnels so close to the brook;
 - The visual impact of the polytunnels is damaging to the amenity of the valley and has a negative impact upon the ability to attract visitors to the area;
 - The visual impact is felt from local public footpaths;
 - The application is symptomatic of the industrialisation of farming, to the detriment of the local landscape and the financial benefit of a few;
 - The negative impact upon the local economy vastly outweighs the benefits of jobs created, which appear to go to migrant workers in any case;
 - Is this application the thin end of the wedge as regards the future expansion of polytunnels down the valley?
 - The polythene will not be stripped away during the winter months.
- 5.10 1 letter of support has been received from BerryWorld Ltd, Turnford, Broxbourne, Hertfordshire. The content is summarised as follows:
- The demand for UK produced blueberries is increasing year on year;
 - The increase in UK produced blueberries will reduce the requirement to import food;
 - The plant nursery will ensure a good quality of plant stock into the future.
- 5.11 The applicant has advised that the rainwater that falls onto the polytunnels is harvested and pumped into the steel storage tank (part of application DCSE2009/0945/F), which prevents surge run-off into the brook during rainfall events. The untreated rainwater is held in the tank until required for irrigation of the blueberries in the nursery. When required for irrigation that water from the storage tank is automatically treated with circa 0.6% of a synthetic acid through a computer controlled dosing rig that also adds small quantities of fertiliser. Relatively small quantities of acid are required to reduce the pH of the rainwater to the required pH 5.0 as required by the blueberries.

The quantity of water applied to the blueberry plants each day is regulated by a device which measures the amount of sun light received by the plants. Excess water is not used with the effect that run-off will be minimal. Any run-off that does occur is tested for pH and electro-conductivity daily. By the time that the water has passed through the compost in the pots pH has normally returned to pH 6.8 i.e. virtually neutral.

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

6. Officer's Appraisal

- 6.1 The application seeks planning permission for the permanent retention of polytunnels (0.99ha) on a site immediately to the north-east of Coleraine Farm buildings. The polytunnels are used as a blueberry nursery and propagation facility. They have been erected so that the application is now retrospective.
- 6.2 Due to the recent proliferation of polytunnels in Herefordshire and in response to the lack of clear planning policy direction, the Council has adopted a Polytunnels Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). This document augments Development Plan policies in the light of the increased occurrence of large-scale polytunnel development in Herefordshire. In the absence of a specific policy, the SPD is accorded significant weight in the determination process. The SPD contains 20 guidelines based around the key impacts that normally require assessment. These range from an assessment of the economic benefits that are often promoted in support of polytunnel growing methods, to guidance as to how to mitigate the adverse visual impact that can occur.
- 6.3 The application only makes relatively scant reference to the economic benefits that can accrue from the use of polytunnels. The letter of support does refer to the increase in demand for UK produced blueberries, which will help reduce the quantity of imported produce and air miles. Once again, the benefits are very difficult to quantify with accuracy, and in your officer's opinion, the landscape and visual impact is the key assessment in relation to this application. To weigh against economic benefits there are several guidelines that relate to landscape impact and mitigation and control over the proliferation of polytunnels within an individual holding or landscape typology.
- 6.4 In this case the application site is in an attractive rural area, a short distance to the east, but not within, of the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is clear that the historic landscape character of the immediate area (i.e. Principal Settled Farmlands), has been degraded through modern farm development, namely the extensive existing Coleraine Farm buildings. Against the backdrop provided by these buildings, the landscapes officer has no objection to the proposed polytunnels. It is acknowledged that these views are expressed in the context of the degradation of the landscape that has occurred over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. However, the landscaping proposed in mitigation in relation both to the polytunnels and the seasonal workers accommodation site will provide some restoration of the degraded landscape. These measures include riparian planting along Castle Brook and planting up of gaps in the hedgerow along Coughton Lane. This, along with the location of the polytunnels upon low-lying land, is considered to offset the visual impact.
- 6.5 In the opinion of the landscapes officer therefore, guideline 5 of the SPD, which requires that the visual impact of polytunnels must be capable of being satisfactorily mitigated, is addressed. Conditions are recommended to ensure that the landscape mitigation strategy is delivered.
- 6.6 The Environment Agency has no objection to the proposal on flood risk grounds, but recommends that sustainable drainage techniques be employed to ensure that run-off does not reach the water course with undue speed. This issue of run-off is addressed at 5.10 above, which explains that rainwater run-off from the polytunnels is collected and stored until required and then used via a regulated system to irrigate the blueberries, which stand in pots. Once passed through the blueberries any excess water is typically nearing neutral pH having been reduced to 5.0. In this context, pollution of the water course is not considered to represent an undue threat. In any event, the protection of the water course is within the jurisdiction of the Environment Agency who have recourse to specific legislation if required.

- 6.7 Several letters of objection raise concern at the absence of any mention within the application of traffic generation associated with the polytunnels. In cases where polytunnels occupy comparatively isolated rural locations traffic generation is a material planning consideration. In this case, however, the issue is considered less significant. The polytunnel site generates very little traffic over and above the position that would exist were the polytunnels not in place. Moreover, the site is immediately adjacent the main operational centre of the Cobrey Farms business, including the worker accommodation, main packhouse and office headquarters. In this context traffic arising specifically from the polytunnel development is negligible and the Traffic Manager's comments reflect this.

Conclusions

Given the context provided by the existing farm buildings, the visual impact of the polytunnels is not considered so severe as to warrant refusal of the application on landscape grounds. The application is consequently recommended for approval subject to conditions that will ensure that the mitigation measures are secured and delivered promptly. In view of the relative lack of certainty as regards the long-term direction of the farming operations, it is considered both necessary and reasonable to impose a condition to require the removal of the polytunnels at such time that they are no longer required for agricultural purposes.

RECOMMENDATION

That planning permission be granted subject to the following conditions:

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 In the event of the polytunnels hereby permitted becoming redundant the polytunnels, including the supporting structures and any structures, fixtures and fittings within them, shall be removed from the application site within a period of 6 months.

Reason: To ensure that the polytunnels are only retained on site for the period that they are required in connection with the agricultural enterprise so as to comply with Policy LA2 of the Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

5 No polytunnel shall exceed 3.7 metres above existing ground level.

Reason: To control the visual impact of the development within the landscape in accordance with Policy LA2 of the Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

6 I21 (Scheme of surface water regulation)

Reason: To prevent the increased risk of flooding and to comply with Policy DR4 of the Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan.

- 7 Within 3 months of the date of this planning permission, an ecological and wildlife enhancement strategy for the Coughton Brook shall be submitted to the local planning authority and implemented as approved and maintained thereafter unless otherwise agreed in writing with the local planning authority.

Reason: To comply with Herefordshire Council's Unitary Development Plan Policies NC6, NC8, NC9 in relation to Nature Conservation and Biodiversity and to meet the requirements of PPS9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation and the NERC Act 2006.

Informatives:

- 1. N19 - Avoidance of doubt - Approved Plans
- 2. N15 - Reason(s) for the Grant of Planning Permission

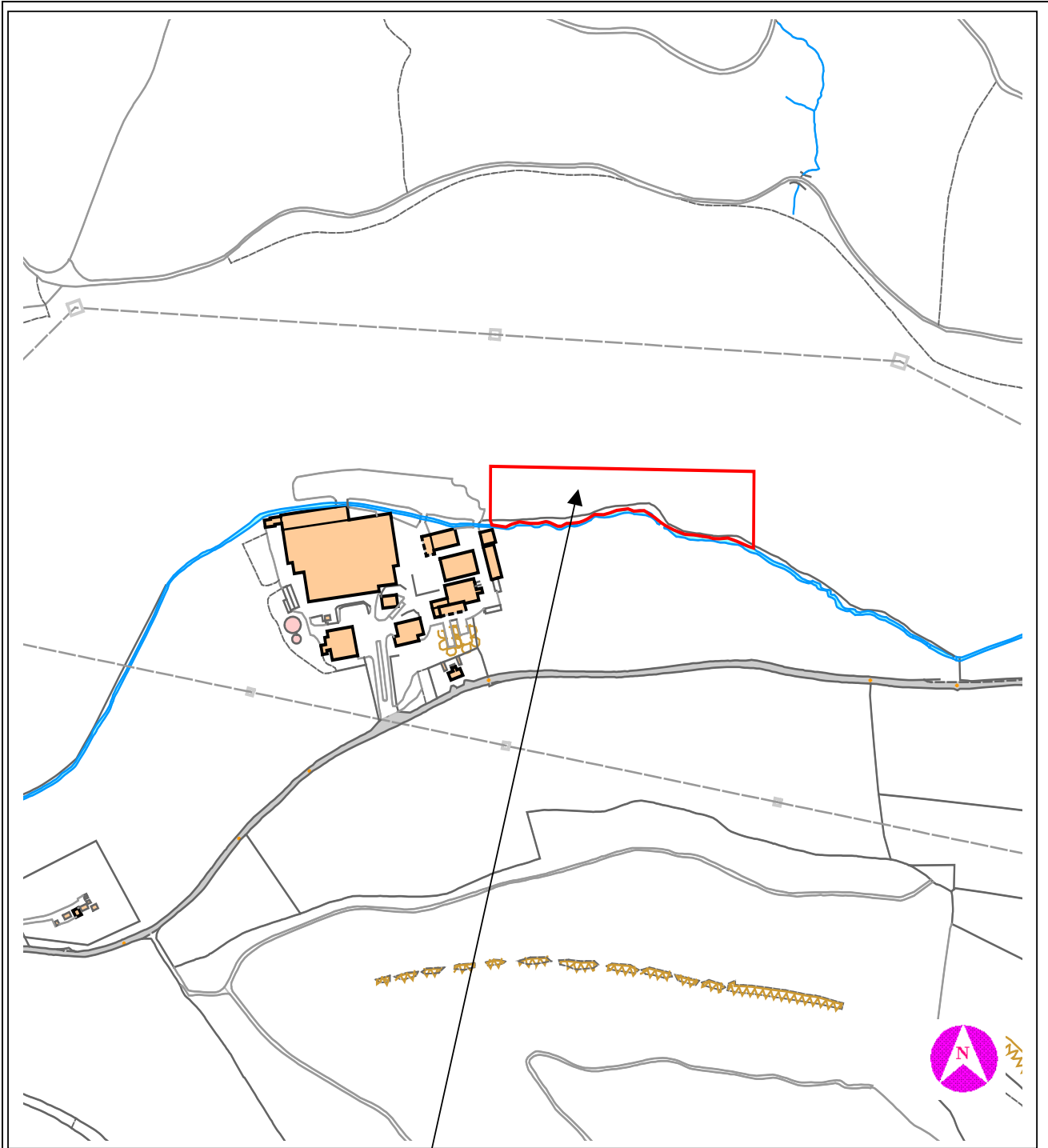
Decision:

Notes:

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Background Papers

Internal departmental consultation replies.



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APPLICATION NO: DCSE0009/0944/F

SCALE : 1 : 5371

SITE ADDRESS : Land adjacent to Coleraine Buildings, Coughton, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, HR9 5SG

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