

Hadlow/Mereworth (Mereworth)/West Peckham/East Peckham/Wateringbury	565153 154052	8 July 2010	TM/08/03739/FL
--	--------------------------	--------------------	-----------------------

Hadlow, Mereworth And
West Peckham/East
Peckham & Golden
Green/Wateringbury

Proposal: Erection of agricultural polytunnels covered with clear plastic sheeting. To include rotational tunnels and successive tunnels with no more than 165ha (30%) of the landholding covered with tunnels in any one calendar year

Location: Barons Place Farm Seven Mile Lane Mereworth Maidstone Kent ME18 5NE

Applicant: Mrs M Regan

1. Purpose of report:

- 1.1 This application is reported to Committee on this occasion **solely** for the purpose of seeking Members' endorsement to the holding of a Members' site Inspection.

2. Brief Description of the Proposed Development:

- 2.1 The application seeks planning permission for the erection of agricultural polytunnels in certain identified fields within the applicant's agricultural holdings. Although the location of the development is given as Barons Place Farm, the geographical extent of the area over which the polytunnels are proposed includes other farm holdings operated by the applicant and extends from Beech Road (Kings Hill) in the north to Stanford Lane and Bullen Lane (East Peckham) in the south and from Forge Lane and Martins Lane (West Peckham) in the west almost to Cannon Lane (Wateringbury) in the east. The total extent of the application site is some 557 hectares and now comprises a slightly modified version of that originally submitted. However the application proposes that, within any calendar year, only a maximum of 165 hectares, or 30% of the total site area, would be covered by polytunnels.
- 2.2 The purpose of the polytunnels is to provide protection for soft fruit crops (primarily strawberries and raspberries). Within this overall proposal, there are two distinct types of tunnel: "rotational" tunnels and "successional" tunnels. Rotational tunnels are used to cover crops grown in the ground and are in place only for the duration of that crop. They are then removed as the field is then used for other crops as part of the crop rotation. Typically, tunnels would be in place in any one field for between two and six years, depending upon the type of crop, site conditions, etc. At the end of each harvest, the plastic covers are slipped off and rolled up to await the start of the next growing season. Fields totalling 91ha are identified for rotational tunnels. Successional tunnels are used where the crop is planted into

pots or bags containing growing media, either on raised beds on the ground or in bags or troughs on raised “table tops”. The tunnel framework stays in place for successive crops and is intended to remain as long as soft fruit is grown in that field. Fields totalling 74ha are identified for successional tunnels. It is these two different types of tunnel use that make up the 165ha referred to in paragraph 2.1 above.

2.3 The tunnels themselves comprise a series of steel framed hoops fixed into the ground at intervals of 2.2m over which plastic sheeting is provided to protect the crop. The hoops are fixed to the ground by posts screwed or pushed into the soil to a depth of 40-60cm. They comprise a series of adjoining “bays”, depending on the size and shape of the field. The maximum height of the tunnels is 4.5m and their maximum length is 200m.

3. Discussion:

3.1 From the brief summary I have set out above, Members will understand that this application covers a very wide area of the Borough. The site lies within the Metropolitan Green Belt adjoining a number of settlements including West Peckham, Mereworth, and Kings Hill and close to Hadlow and Watlington. There are other enclaves of residential development and individual dwellings within the general extent of the site and nearby. The High Court has ruled that agricultural polytunnels similar to those proposed here are, in terms of Green Belt policy, “not inappropriate”. However, aside from that, the application raises a wide range of planning issues.

3.2 The application was first submitted in late December 2008 and, following initial assessment, in June 2009 I requested a wide range of additional information to enable the full and proper consideration of the application. The applicant has recently responded to that request by providing substantial additional documentation (which also incorporates some amendments to the proposal). The supporting information now includes:

- a Planning Statement describing the background to the proposal and identifying key issues,
- an updated Design and Access Statement,
- a detailed Management Plan (which includes separate sections dealing with, for example, water management, soil management, waste management, crop rotation, nuisance management and biodiversity),
- economic reports setting out the contribution that the farm makes to the rural and agricultural economy, and the role that the use of polytunnels plays in underpinning this,
- a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, and

- a Flood risk Assessment.

- 3.3 The initial round of public consultation, carried out when the application was first submitted, elicited a substantial number of responses both in support of the proposal and opposing it from, as might be expected, a wide geographical area. I will not, in this report, attempt a detailed summary of the issues raised. A further round of public consultation is now under way following receipt of the further documentation from the applicant. All of the representations received will be reported to the meeting of the Committee when the application is put forward for determination.
- 3.4 Given the physical nature of the development and the wide geographical area over which it will be seen, its visual effect is clearly going to be a major consideration for Members to take into account. I believe it is also fair to say that few Members will be familiar with the whole of the area that the application covers or affects. In the light of this, and following discussion with your Chairman and other local Members whose areas are most directly affected, I am taking the unusual step of recommending that a Members' Site Inspection be held prior to putting forward the substantive report and recommendations, in order to assist Members in familiarising themselves more fully with what is proposed and where. The intention would be to view the site from a number of carefully chosen vantage points both within and near to the site of the proposed polytunnels, so that, amongst other things, Members may see the proposed sites of the tunnels in the context of the prevailing topography and the settings of the settlements and Conservation Areas, etc that are likely to be affected.
- 3.5 Given the distance that may need to be covered, and that it is therefore likely to take some time to undertake, I have suggested that the Site Inspection might most appropriately be arranged for a Saturday morning. I would arrange a coach to transport Members between the various "viewing points". A provisional date of Saturday 9 October has been identified. I would then report back to this Committee at a later date with a comprehensive report setting out the relevant issues. For Members' information, given the level of public interest that has already been shown in this proposal, we have identified that the most practicable approach at that stage would be to hold a special meeting of this Committee, dedicated to this one application. Provisionally, 24 November has been identified as a suitable date for such a meeting, but these arrangements will be confirmed nearer the time.

4. Recommendation:

- 4.1 That a Members' Site Inspection be held.

Contact: Neil Hewett