



Report of the Chief Planning Officer

PLANS PANEL EAST

Date: 17th February 2011

Subject: Application 10/02705/FU: Erection of polytunnels at Sturton Grange Farm, Ridge Road, Leeds, LS25 4DZ

APPLICANT	DATE VALID	TARGET DATE
C Makin	14.06.10	13.09.10

Electoral Wards Affected:

Garforth & Swillington

Ward Members consulted
(referred to in report)

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

**RECOMMENDATION:
GRANT PERMISSION subject to the conditions specified:**

Conditions

- 1) Standard time limit
- 2) Details to be carried out in accordance with the submitted plans
- 3) Landscape to be undertaken in accordance with the agreed details
- 4) New landscaping to be added to existing biodiversity management plan for the holding
- 5) Surface water drainage to be provided in accordance with agreed details

Full details of the wording of the conditions to be delegated to the Chief Planning Officer, including any amendments as considered necessary.

Reason for approval: The application is considered to comply with policies GP5, N10, N25, N26, N32, N33, N35, N37A, N38B, N39A, N49, N51, LD1, and T2 of the UDP Review, as well as guidance contained within PPS1, PPG2 and PPS7 and having regard to all other

material considerations the City Council considers there are very special circumstances to justify this development in the Green Belt.

1.0 INTRODUCTION:

- 1.1 This application was withdrawn from the 16th December meeting to allow further consultation to take place between officers and the planning consultant employed on behalf of a local resident. The request for a deferral was instigated by Councillor Dobson who also wanted to attend meeting as the initial arrangements had to be cancelled due to bad weather.
- 1.2 A meeting took place on 26th January between the case officer and the planning consultant and the report has been updated to reflect this. Councillor Dobson was also due to attend but couldn't subsequently make it at the last minute. He has nevertheless been updated since the meeting took place and advised the application would be reported to the February Panel meeting. A separate meeting has also been offered but not taken up.
- 1.3 In the light of the above, Councillor Dobson's original comments are still considered to remain in that he is concerned about the erosion of the Green Belt and that more polytunnels equals more seasonal workers which in turn means more caravans. He also requests a Panel determination of the application.

2.0 PROPOSAL:

- 2.1 This application proposes to cover field 6 within the Sturton Grange Farm holding with 'Spanish' style polytunnels laid out in an east to west direction. A total area of 8.3 hectares is proposed and would be used for the production of soft fruit (e.g. strawberries, blackberries, raspberries). The polytunnels would have a similar appearance to those already situated within the farm holding and comprise of a simple metal framework with plastic sheeting stretched over. Each tunnel would be approximately 3.2m high and 8m wide. The length varies according to the size and shape of the field and the plastic covering is removed during the winter months when picking is complete.
- 2.2 The additional polytunnels are shown to be positioned next to the ones already on site and would be adjacent to the farm tracks which provide access to the main farm complex for subsequent distribution off-site.
- 2.3 Accompanying the application is a scheme of landscaping in the form of a 20m wide buffer along the western boundary which abuts the residential properties. A further gap of 10m from the edge of the landscaping to the polytunnels themselves is also proposed giving a separation distance of 30m to the common boundary. Further screening is proposed to either side of the footpath which runs through the south western corner of field 6 and also along the northern edge of the field situated on the opposite side of Sturton Grange Lane. Drainage measures are also proposed to address surface water run off from the polytunnels.
- 2.4 No additional caravans are proposed as part of the current application as sufficient capacity exists within those already on-site or permitted to accommodate the soft fruit labour requirements of the entire holding.

3.0 SITE AND SURROUNDINGS:

- 3.1 This application relates to land forming part of the Sturton Grange Farm holding which is situated just beyond the eastern edge of the built-up area of Garforth. The main holding extends from the northern side of the Leeds to York railway line towards Ridge Road (A656) to the east and then to Aberford Road (A624) to the northwest. Part of the holding is also located on the northern side of Ridge Road (extending towards the motorway). A number of public rights of way cross the site including in the south western corner of field 6 and also to the south of the red lined boundary. A separate footpath diversion request has been submitted by the applicant and is being considered by Public Rights of Way Officers.
- 3.2 The application site itself primarily relates to field 6 although part of it also extends beyond Sturton Grange Lane to include part of the grassed field to the south which is currently used for grazing sheep. Field 6 slopes gently down from north to south and is already in agricultural use. To the west abutting field 6 are the rear gardens to the residential properties which line the majority of the holding's common boundary. This boundary comprises of a combination of timber or wire fencing for the most part with various pockets of relatively low level landscaping. To the north west is Garforth Town's football ground and to the north east extending round to the east are a number of fields already covered by Spanish style polytunnels. To the south is the remainder of the field used for grazing, beyond which is the farm's irrigation reservoir that has recently had its capacity increased under agricultural permitted development rights. To the south west is another grassed field which has been left idle since it was last used to house the temporary seasonal workers caravans a couple of years ago before they were moved to their current location.
- 3.3 The farm holding already has a total of 40.5 hectares of polytunnels and permission for up to 84 caravans for use by seasonal agricultural workers. The caravans and 24 hectares of polytunnels were granted permission in March 2009 on a three year temporary basis (expires 18th March 2012) because the permanent siting of caravans within the Green Belt represents inappropriate development. The remaining 16.5 hectares of polytunnels are not time restricted. The number of seasonal agricultural workers caravans already allowed by the previous permission when combined with accommodation already available within the main farmhouse buildings can cater for up to a maximum of 350 workers.
- 3.4 The number of seasonal agricultural workers employed on the holding for the previous 2 years is shown in the table below. A projection for 2011 is also provided.

	2009	2010	2011
Jan	0	0	0
Feb	0	0	0
Mar	8	24	30
April	8	47	50
May	151	100	100
Jun	207	292	200
July	182	323	200
Aug	160	258	300
Sept	144	205	300
Oct	72	176	250
Nov	27	12	50
Dec	0	0	0

4.0 RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY:

- 10/05258/FU- Retention of water pump & treatment sheds – Granted 21/01/11
- 09/04902/FU- Retention of 1 detached training/welfare building for seasonal agricultural workers and 1 detached borehole shed to farm – Granted 06/01/10
- 08/00988/FU– Use of land for siting of seasonal workers caravans and an additional 24 ha of polytunnels to farm – Granted 18/03/09
- 06/03097/FU– Change of use of agricultural land for siting of 60 caravans for seasonal agricultural workers – Refused 07/08/06
- 33/1/05/FU– Laying out of services and detached electricity sub-station to seasonal workers caravan park (18 caravans) – Refused 11/04/06 – Appeal allowed 18/10/06
- 33/174/04/FU– Use of part agricultural land as light aircraft take off/landing strip (north/south) – Granted 04/11/08
- 33/376/01/FU– Laying out of access road, car parking and associated landscaping to potato manufacturing facility – Refused 19/02/02 – Appeal allowed 28/10/02
- 33/375/01/FU– Change of use of agricultural building to potato product manufacturing facility with parking and landscaping – Refused 19/02/02 – Appeal allowed 28/10/02
- 33/374/01/MIN– Effluent treatment plant to potato product manufacturing facility – Refused 19/02/02 – Appeal allowed 28/10/02
- 33/53/97/FU– Use of part of agricultural land to light aircraft take off/landing strip – Granted 01/02/02

5.0 HISTORY OF NEGOTIATIONS:

- 5.1 In the light of comments made by consultees and various residents, Officers have sought further clarification and revisions regarding the intended drainage strategy to deal with surface water run off and potential flooding. Further revisions have also been secured to the design and content of the landscaping buffer with a view to making it more sympathetic but also effective for residents who abut the application site.

6.0 PUBLIC/LOCAL RESPONSE:

- 6.1 The application was initially advertised by site notices dated 30th June 2010. A total of 18 representations were received including one from Councillor Dobson. The main comments made are provided below although one resident, despite being concerned about flooding and that the screen planting might not be undertaken doesn't object providing these two issues are resolved.
- 6.2 Councillor Dobson – Concerned the development is a further erosion of the Green Belt and that more polytunnels equals more seasonal workers which in turn means more caravans and potential re-occupation of the bottom field. A Panel decision is therefore requested.
- 6.3 Objections (x 14)

- Additional polytunnels means more migrant workers and therefore more caravans. No reference is made concerning the need for more workers/caravans
- Problems already experienced from the workers include litter, noise, disturbance and feeling uncomfortable. Migrant workers are unwelcome and a nuisance to the area so more should not be allowed
- Business plan has altered in terms of the ratio of strawberries and raspberries grown. Also states raspberries have less labour requirements than strawberries. As the crop grown cannot be controlled it should be considered on the worse case scenario which equates to a 20% increase in the workforce
- The intensity of the use is higher than traditional agricultural use and is more equivalent to a commercial warehouse. As workers live on-site the use is also equivalent to a 24 hour operation with regard to traffic movements. The use is no longer agricultural in character
- The work has already been started on the assumption permission will be granted
- The polytunnels harm the openness and character of the Green Belt and are located within a very sensitive urban fringe location where the transition between the two should be clearly defined
- Makins is as a member of the British Summer Fruits organisation which operates a code of practice for polytunnels. It states polytunnels should not be sited within 30m of residential properties without consultation and providing views are not obscured. It also states that the plastic covering should be removed for a minimum period of 6 months per calendar year
- Concerned about the noise generated during the construction of the polytunnels, during on-going maintenance and because of the wind
- Proposed planting includes trees which block sunlight
- Tree roots may become a problem and landscaping may not be maintained. Previous screen planting not undertaken
- Drainage problems have been experienced in recent years due to clay in the soil. Flooding of houses could result due to increased surface run-off
- Existing views over the open field would be lost and replaced with polytunnels
- House values would decrease due to the presence of the polytunnels
- Plastic could end up in gardens if dislodged and would be a danger to children
- Large parts of the world's population are dying of starvation because basic grains are not grown. Even more land would be given over to a luxury crop
- No Environmental Impact Assessment has been completed – considered that one should have been done
- Makins should utilise other land rather than using the field adjacent to houses
- The polytunnels reflect the sun which can result in glare being a problem
- Proposed landscaping is not adequate as screening will only occur after several years growth. Some trees are also too close to gardens and may cause future problems. Long-term maintenance also needs to be secured

6.4 Support (x 2)

- The applicant produces food and is looking to stay in business during difficult times. Have lived in the property for 30 years and realised the proximity of the working farm. Some problems were experienced in the early years but few since then. The land could be sold for housing and no one is entitled to views over fields
- The polytunnels allow more food to be grown per acre so shouldn't be objected to. They do not spoil the countryside and farms are production units, not picture-postcard tourist attractions

6.5 Following receipt of revised plans for both the drainage and landscaping proposals, the application was re-advertised by site notices dated 8th October 2010. One

objection has been received (from a resident who previously commented) raising the following concerns:

- Polytunnels should be sited further anyway from residents
- Noise concerns due to the wind and workers
- More workers will be required
- Screen planting is un-welcomed due to loss of light, leaf drop and may block the footpath if not maintained
- Drainage problems

6.6 Since the December Panel report was made available and following withdrawal of the application from that meeting, the following additional comments have been received (either direct from the same resident who has previously commented or via their planning consult):

- The officer report does not adequately consider the impact the farm holding already has on residents and accordingly any intensification of the use is a material consideration.
- Complaints have not been directed to the Council under the management condition because “the council had already demonstrated their inability” to control the activity so the applicant has been contacted direct.
- No objection to the nationally or ethnicity of workers, simply that their numbers cause disturbance, noise and activity on a 24 hour basis.
- Consider past methods to mitigate disturbance have been ineffectual, unenforceable or disregarded entirely. What methods have been explored this time?
- Previous conditions have not been complied with. Is enforcement action being considered?
- Requirement for 84 caravans no longer necessary based on current numbers.
- How can permanent permission morally and legally be granted when the framework within which the site operates will be under scrutiny and review early in 2012?
- Decision on the current application should be delayed for 1 season to ensure residents can document the existing loss of amenity before further expansion is considered. Middle ground is possible if the applicant worked with the residents.

6.7 The following main comments were submitted by the objector’s planning consultant (in report format) to update their position and to summarise the meeting held on 26th January 2011. As many of the comments are already outlined in paragraphs 6.3, 6.5 and 6.6 they have not been repeated. Relevant policies already contained in Section 8 of this report are also not repeated. A site visit is requested.

- Circular 11/85 is considered relevant as it provides advice on temporary structures. The British Summer Fruits organisation states that “polytunnels are portable, temporary structure, under the voluntary code of practice – which BSF growers should adhere to – the polythene covering over the frames must be removed for a minimum period of at least six in any calendar year.” As the polytunnels are inherently temporary structures it is inappropriate to grant permission at all as they are contrary to policy and adversely affect residents living conditions. The 3 year trial period for the caravans and 24 ha of polytunnels has highlighted the problems so no further extension should be considered.
- A government letter dated July 2007 concerning polytunnels is also referenced as being relevant and is quoted as follows “the key factor to take into account is the harm which has been, or may be, caused to local amenity”.

- A survey of residents living along Sturton Grange Lane has been undertaken and indicates that disturbance from pedestrians, late night noise and taxis/vans dropping off workers are the main source of problems. (Survey results indicate 6 responses although no addresses have been provided)
 - All respondents stated current levels of disturbance were annoying and half felt it was very annoying, unreasonable and disturbed the enjoyment of their home
 - All respondents were very clear that the noise and disturbance occurred every day or night with most confirming any extension would only make things worse.
 - Respondents described the street as semi-rural, rural, peaceful/tranquil and friendly in the winter but busy, noisy, lively, bustling and unfriendly in the summer.
- The report concludes that the application cannot be viewed in isolation and that it is premature to determine it without planning comprehensively for a sustainable future. It is therefore contrary to the advice contained in PPS1 and PPS7.

7.0 CONSULTATIONS RESPONSES:

Statutory:

7.1 Environment Agency

Initial comments: Object on the grounds that the flood risk assessment fails to demonstrate that surface water can be effectively drained using infiltration methods.
Revised comments: Following receipt of further information, no objection is raised subject to the surface water drainage being provided in accordance with the revised details

Non-statutory:

7.2 Group Surveyor (Agriculture)

The application relates to a well established and extensive fruit growing business which already has significant polytunnels. The applicant's ambitions to expand fruit growing to include additional varieties and types of fruit to extend the overall fruit growing season are known. This is likely to have the effect of reducing peak demand for labour but extending the main period of picking over more months as different fruits ripen. The additional polytunnels therefore appear to be a reasonable response to the expanding needs of the holding.

Whilst being aware polytunnels are often criticised for their appearance, they are in widespread use for increasing types of fruit.

7.3 Highways

The proposal is acceptable in highway terms as the additional polytunnels would not significantly change the existing operation of the site which is served by Ridge Road.

7.4 Public Rights of Way

Sturton Grange No. 2 runs through the application site and has a minimum definitive width of 2m. This width needs to be retained.

7.5 Flood Risk Management

Initial comments: Further details required as it has not been adequately demonstrated that infiltration drainage methods are appropriate due to the potential presence of clay in the soil.

Revised comments: Following the receipt of further information and the proposal to provide trenches between polytunnels which will increase natural percolation and to link into the trench which feeds the existing irrigation reservoir, no objection.

- 7.6 Yorkshire Water
No comments required as it does not connect into any Yorkshire Water public infrastructure.

8.0 PLANNING POLICIES:

Development Plan:

- 8.1 The development plan comprises the Regional Spatial Strategy to 2026 (RSS) and the adopted Leeds Unitary Development Plan (Review 2006). The RSS was issued in May 2008 and includes a broad development strategy for the region setting out regional priorities in terms of location and scale of development. No RSS policies have specific relevance to the application site or scheme proposed.

Leeds Unitary Development Plan (Review):

- 8.2 The application site is located within the Green Belt as shown on the Adopted Unitary Development Plan (Review 2006) proposals map and identified by Policy N32. Other UDP policies of relevance are as follows:

Policy GP5: Seeks to resolve detailed planning considerations including design, access and amenity issues.

Policy N10: Developments which adversely affect public rights of way will not be supported unless suitable alternatives are provided.

Policy N25: Site boundaries should be designed in a positive manner.

Policy N26: Full applications should indicate how they would be landscaped.

Policy N33: Controls development within the Green Belt

Policy N35: Proposals which seriously conflict with protecting the best agricultural land will not be permitted.

Policy N37A: All new development within the countryside should have regard to the existing character and where appropriate, contribute positively to restoration or enhancement objectives through landscaping.

Policy N38B: Relevant planning applications must be accompanied by Flood Risk Assessments.

Policy N39A: Development which will significantly increase surface water run-off should make provision for adequate drainage.

Policy N51: New development should wherever possible enhance existing wildlife habitats and provide new opportunities.

Policy LD1: Requires developments to be adequately landscaped.

Policy T2: Considers issues of highway safety

Supplementary Guidance No.25 –Greening the built edge

- 8.3 National Planning Policy Guidance:
PPS 1: Delivering Sustainable Development
PPG 2: Green Belts
PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas
PPS 9: Nature Conservation

9.0 MAIN ISSUES

1. Principle of development in the Green Belt

2. Visual Impact
3. Impact on residential amenity and social issues
4. Drainage issues
5. Nature Conservation

10.0 APPRAISAL

1. Principle of development in the Green Belt:

- 10.1 Fruit growing falls within the definition of agriculture and accordingly the use of polytunnels to assist with this activity represents appropriate development within the Green Belt. In this light, polytunnels are considered to be acceptable in principle although it is still necessary to consider their visual impact.
- 10.2 Although PPG 2 'Green Belts' does explain the main reasons for designating land as Green Belt it mostly focuses on seeking to resist inappropriate development and does not mention polytunnels. Similarly, PPS 7 'Sustainable Development in Rural Areas' offers no specific guidance on the subject although it does recognise the important and varied role of agriculture. In particular, it states that local planning policies should enable farming and farmers to
- become more competitive, sustainable and environmentally friendly
 - adapt to new and changing markets
 - broaden their operations to 'add value' to their primary produce
- (Para 27)
- 10.3 In view of the above and the government's commitment towards the promotion of agriculture, reducing food miles and generally seeking to become less reliant on foreign food imports, it is considered current planning policy is weighted in favour of the farmer. For this reason, Officers are of the opinion that providing the visual impact of any proposal for appropriate development within the Green Belt is not seriously detrimental, the scheme can be supported.

2. Visual Impact:

- 10.4 In recognition that polytunnels are appropriate development within the Green Belt, the main issue for consideration as far as planning policy is concerned relates to their visual impact.
- 10.5 Although polytunnels have not historically formed part of the British rural landscape, they are becoming more commonplace as farming practices constantly adapt to keep pace with ever changing consumer demands and market forces. For these reasons it is essential that when polytunnels are proposed they are only sited in areas where their visual impact is considered acceptable. The most sensitive of Green Belt locations should therefore be avoided although it must be recognised that they will usually need to be positioned within the Green Belt as this is where most agriculture takes place.
- 10.6 Within the above context, it is noted neither the application site or the farm holding itself fall within one of the Council's UDPR defined 'Special Landscape Areas' where visual impact considerations are elevated due to a requirement to protect a particular or dominant landscape character. As such, the principle of allowing polytunnels

within the area is considered to be strong and has already been established by the grant of the previous polytunnels application.

- 10.7 Notwithstanding the above, the introduction of polytunnels at the scale proposed will clearly have some visual impact for the residents who face onto field 6. Views of the polytunnels from within the holding itself will also be possible due to the presence of public footpaths. It is therefore the extent of the visual impact that needs to be considered rather than the fact they would be visible per se.
- 10.8 Field 6 currently comprises of open ground and many of the residents who face it can look over it into the distance. However, it is already proposed to undertake extensive planting along the common boundary as part of the 2008 application to screen the polytunnels already present. As such, the loss of existing views reported by local residents will already occur once the planting is undertaken and established.
- 10.9 In recognition of the above and as a result of the current proposal to bring the polytunnels closer to residents gardens, Officers have in conjunction with the applicant's Landscape Architect sought to review the original proposal for a 10m wide landscape buffer. This is also the reason why the original screen planting associated with the 2008 application has not been undertaken as it was considered prudent to wait for the outcome of the current application before starting any new planting.
- 10.10 The final landscape scheme now proposed comprises of a 20m wide buffer in the form of a bund that raises to a maximum height of 1.5m in the centre. The first 5m of landscaping next to residents boundaries would comprise of a mix of shrubs and trees and is expected to grow to a height of approximately 3m. The larger specimens within the first 5m would however be planted 2.5m away from the common boundary to ensure residents gardens are not unduly affected by roots or overshadowing issues in the future. The next 10m of landscaping would contain a different mix of shrubs and trees, some of which would grow to approximately 5m in height. The last 5m would revert back to the lower level mix and all the species proposed can already be found in the locality. The landscape buffer now proposed is also noted to be twice as wide as that originally anticipated under the 2008 permission.
- 10.11 When considering the potential effectiveness of the revised landscape scheme, the provision of a 20m wide buffer is considered to be very generous and would form a very effective screen since it would have a total height of 6.5m centrally in the long term. The fact the landscaping would be planted on a 1.5m high bund and a further separation gap of 10m before the polytunnels actually start also means its screening capabilities at day one would also be significant. In the light of these factors, the visual impact of the polytunnels as experienced from the adjacent properties is considered to be adequately compensated for through the introduction of landscape screening.
- 10.12 With respect to the views gained by using the public footpaths which cross the site, again it is proposed to introduce landscaped buffers to the sides of the relevant paths. As the routes themselves would not be adversely affected by this approach it is considered to be acceptable. This approach is also noted to have been successfully utilised elsewhere on the farm holding. Public Rights of Way Officers are also aware of the current application, raise no objection to the landscaping proposed and will consider the scheme's impact on the separate footpath diversion request which has been made by the applicant.

10.13 More generally, the proposal to cover field 6 with polytunnels represents the infilling of a parcel of land already enclosed by existing polytunnels to the northeast and east and residential properties to the west. In the light of the significant landscape screening proposed at all of the sensitive boundaries, it is considered that the proposal will not cause significant harm to the amenities of the area.

3. Impact on residential amenity and social issues:

10.14 Many of the problems reported by some residents in their letters of objection (including more recently in the residents questionnaire) relate to the agricultural workers themselves rather than the polytunnels. Issues such as noise, disturbance and litter are mentioned and are mostly focused on the use of Sturton Grange Lane, in particular where it joins with the residential estate to the west. Some residents also cite the increase in the number of foreign seasonal workers into the area (and subsequent need for more caravans) as being problematic as tensions between them and local residents are reported.

10.15 Members may recall that one of the main reasons why the 2008 application for 84 caravans was supported was to help alleviate some of the problems residents were experiencing due to the close proximity of the workers caravans to their houses. The issue being that the Council had no control over the use or siting of caravans used for seasonal agricultural workers because it was being provided under agricultural permitted development rights.

10.16 The 2008 application sought to address the issues as best it could at the time and resulted in the caravans being moved to a part of the holding where they would not cause problems. Nevertheless, it was still accepted the workers would remain and ultimately it was not for the planning system to determine where they came from.

10.17 Notwithstanding the above and in an attempt to exercise an element of control over the workers, a general management and complaints reporting condition was attached to the previous permission which allows the Council to take up any residents complaints anonymously direct with the applicant. To date, only one formal complaint has been submitted to the Council in 2009 reporting incidents of noise and disturbance by workers when entering and leaving the holding via Sturton Grange Lane. This complaint resulted in the applicant reminding all workers of the need to respect neighbouring residents living conditions. No further formal complaints have been reported to the Council since 2009 although one resident has confirmed that the applicant has been approached direct raising concerns on a number of occasions.

10.18 According to some letters of objection (and supported by the recent residents questionnaire) there are still problems with the farm workers although it is surprising only one household has ever raised these concerns direct with the Council. This lack of complaints received under the management and reporting condition and the fact only two formal objection letters have been received from residents who abut Sturton Grange Lane (out of the 11 who do) is considered significant and for this reason it is not considered reasonable to resist the application on amenity grounds. This view is also supported by a search of crimes and incidents relating to the area and in particular to the workers themselves. Since the beginning of 2010, the police have no record of any complaints relating to the workers although some unsubstantiated reports of local youths singling them out for verbal abuse have been noted by the Neighbourhood Policing Team.

- 10.19 In the light of the above and the applicant's confirmation that the additional polytunnels would not increase the labour requirements of the holding above the 300 worker mark (which is 50 lower than originally anticipated in the 2008 application and which can be readily housed within authorised on-site accommodation), it is not considered reasonable to resist the current application on the grounds it adversely impacts on residents living conditions. It should also be noted permitted development rights for agricultural workers accommodation has already been removed under the 2008 application so a separate application would be required in the event more caravans were required in the future.
- 10.20 With respect to noise, the 30m separation distance to residents rear boundaries and the high standard of maintenance undertaken to ensure the polytunnels perform correctly at all times is such that problems are unlikely to be experienced. The separation distance is also noted to be in accordance with that recommended by the British Summer Fruits organisation and the plastic covering is also removed during the winter months when noise issues are likely to be greatest.
- 10.21 Responding specifically to the comments made by the objector's planning consultant in paragraph 6.7, it is not considered appropriate to treat the proposed polytunnels as temporary structures due to their scale, degree of permanence and physical attachment to the ground. In addition, the main purpose of the government letter dated July 2007 was to clarify the planning status of polytunnels following a High Court judgement in 2006 and to provide advice on enforcement issues.

4. Drainage issues:

- 10.22 Initially, both the Environment Agency and the Council's Flood Risk Management team were concerned about the proposed means of dealing with surface water run-off via infiltration due to the lack of information provided. This was also a concern highlighted by a number of local residents.
- 10.23 Nevertheless, following the receipt of additional supporting information and an upgraded drainage strategy, both objections have been withdrawn as it is now proposed to have small trenches running the length of each polytunnel to assist with natural percolation. In recognition that standing water has been found previously in the south western corner of field 6 because of clay, this part of the site is also not to be covered by polytunnels and further landscape planting and a new drainage ditch to connect with the one which currently serves the irrigation reservoir to the south is proposed. All these measures will be secured by condition and accordingly all drainage related issues are considered to have been adequately addressed.

5. Nature Conversation:

- 10.24 In terms of biodiversity issues generally, although the proposal to cover an agricultural field with polytunnels is unlikely to contribute positively itself, the applicant has planted extensively around the holding in the past and substantial new planting is proposed as part of this application. Whilst admittedly the main function of the planting is to provide visual screening, these areas also provide considerable opportunities to increase biodiversity. For this reason it is proposed to include the new landscaped areas in the biodiversity management plan which already applies to the remainder of the holding.

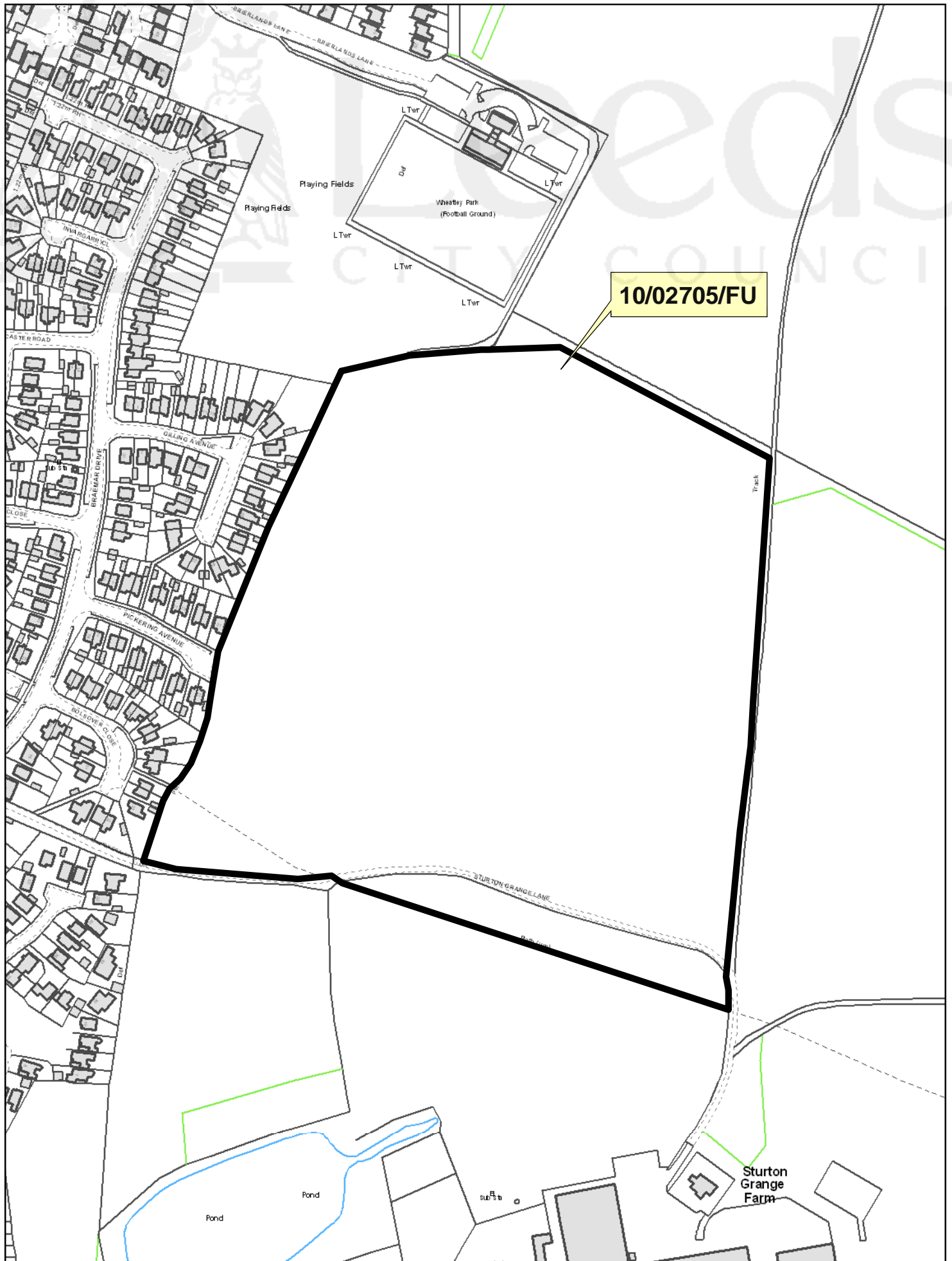
11.0 CONCLUSION

- 11.1 The use of polytunnels as a means of helping to produce more reliable food crops in the British climate is becoming more commonplace. The practice is also noted to be very sustainable as food miles are reduced by not having to rely so heavily on foreign imports. Whilst planning policy regarding the acceptability of such features in the countryside is currently limited, it is clear they are considered to be appropriate development for the purpose of applying Green Belt policies. As such, polytunnels are considered to be acceptable in principle and can be supported providing their visual impact is considered acceptable or can be adequately mitigated.
- 11.2 In the case of the current application, the proposed polytunnels would not be sited within a Special Landscape Area and extensive screen planting is proposed to mitigate their visual impact. This, in addition to the application site's position sandwiched between fields already containing polytunnels and residential gardens is such that it is considered appropriate to support the proposal.
- 11.3 The comments made by various neighbours who consider the prospect of further polytunnels to be unacceptable are noted, however none of the issues raised are considered to be sufficient to warrant refusal of the current application. Particularly as the increase would not take the labour requirements for the holding beyond that which has already been assessed as being acceptable.
- 11.4 As the proposed drainage strategy for the development has been amended to overcome the initial concerns expressed by both the Environment Agency and the Council's own Flood Risk Management officers, the application is now recommended for approval, subject to the conditions specified.

Background Papers:

Application and history files.

Certificate of ownership: Signed on behalf of the applicant



10/02705/FU

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