

# Polytunnels Supplementary Planning Document Issues Paper (July 2007)

## Polytunnels: Issues Paper

It is acknowledged that the increasing number of polytunnels appearing in the Herefordshire countryside is a matter that raises a variety of conflicting opinions and issues and that this type of development can be controversial. Consequently, the Council has recognised that there is a need for further planning guidance in relation to this kind of development and has agreed to the preparation of a Polytunnels Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). The purpose of the SPD will be to make clear those developments which require planning permission. It will also highlight the policy areas and requirements such development proposals will need to address and against which they will ultimately be assessed.

This issues paper is intended to assist those who would like to provide early comments on the production of the Polytunnels SPD. Issues raised at this time by local people, growers, environmentalists or local lobby groups will enable an early understanding of the range and variety of planning matters which will need to be addressed through the SPD.



## **Voluntary Code of Practice for the use of Polytunnels in Herefordshire**

In 2003 it was agreed by Herefordshire Council that a Voluntary Code of Practice to control polytunnels should be put into place. The operation of the Code was kept under review and has subsequently been revised. Under the Code, Herefordshire Council determined that where soil-grown crops were to be propagated under polytunnels, provided the tunnels were moved after two years (and other stipulated conditions applying), then planning permission need not be sought. This was a logical and prudent approach to adopt within the law as it then stood. A recent High Court case concerning development at Tuesley Farm in Godalming, Surrey in 2006 has described the circumstances in which polytunnels will require planning permission. The Council has subsequently suspended the Code pending the preparation of the Polytunnels SPD.

## **Role and Scope of the Polytunnels SPD**

As a result of the recent Tuesley case, in which it was ruled that large-scale polytunnels can amount to development requiring planning permission, the number of planning applications for polytunnel development in Herefordshire is expected to increase. Since there is no planning policy at national, regional or local level which deals specifically with the erection of agricultural polytunnels, the Council intends to produce the Polytunnels SPD, which will provide much needed planning guidance to both potential applicants, environmentalists, local residents and the Council who will determine proposals for such developments.

The SPD will make specific reference to policies contained in the Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan (UDP). As there is no single polytunnels policy, a range of existing policies will need to be considered when assessing such proposals. Some of these will be of direct relevance in all cases relating to the erection of polytunnels needing planning permission and others will apply only in particular circumstances, depending upon the nature of the planning application in question and site specific circumstances.



## **The Community Strategy and the Unitary Development Plan**

The UDP has been prepared within an overall framework of national and regional planning policy guidance. It contains a vision for the future of the County, which was developed jointly with the Herefordshire Partnership and has informed the Community Strategy. The vision being to: create fair and thriving communities; properly protect and enhance the environment through sustainable development; and build a strong, competitive and innovative economy. Therefore at the heart of the UDP are the broad principles of sustainable development. In policy form, these are generally set out as criteria

which particular forms of development should meet.

The aim of policies in the development plan is to achieve a balance between varied and often complex considerations that can both allow and promote appropriate kinds of sustainable activity and development in the places where they are best suited. The erection of polytunnels on a significant scale is therefore guided within a policy framework that permits the meeting of essential social and economic needs in a manner that is properly balanced with environmental factors.

### Planning Issues Associated with the Erection of Polytunnels

The following list is not exhaustive, but outlines the planning issues that most frequently arise when applications for planning permission are being considered:

- ❑ *Visibility/Landscape character* - the prominence of polytunnels in the landscape is an important consideration. Associated issues include the potential of screening opportunities to reduce the visual impact, the cumulative impact of several smaller polytunnel developments, the extent to which the proposal respects landscape character and the appearance of the area, and potential impacts on designated landscapes (in terms of openness, rural character and scenic beauty).
- ❑ *Agricultural Justification/ Diversification* - issues would cover the agricultural reasoning for the polytunnels, their economic need and the economic viability of the enterprise to which they would contribute.
- ❑ *Noise* - from spraying machines, drilling augers, pickers and traffic etc.
- ❑ *Rural Economy* - polytunnels can help support the rural economy and allow the growing of local produce which would otherwise be imported.
- ❑ *Biodiversity* - potential loss of wildlife due to reduction in natural habitats, feeding areas and effects of soil sterilisation reducing soil biodiversity.
- ❑ *Water run-off* - plastic sheeting forms an impermeable layer and therefore on a large scale can increase water run-off, with flooding more of a risk particularly following heavy rainfall.
- ❑ *Tourism/visitors* - the potential negative effect on the landscape could have a knock-on effect on the desirability of the County as a visitor destination.
- ❑ *Transport* - increased vehicular movements, traffic safety, site access etc.
- ❑ *Residents* - consideration of the impact the polytunnels would have on residents' amenity living nearby.
- ❑ *Sustainability* - the use of polytunnels raises several questions in relation to their sustainability, for example; the use and disposal of plastic sheeting, metal hoops, pesticides, soil sterilisation, soil-less growing mediums, imported labour etc.
- ❑ *Siting* - are the polytunnels viewed as part of a farmstead alongside other agricultural buildings, or as an isolated development?
- ❑ *Coalescence* - the 'built' nature of polytunnels erected between distinct settlements could cause a coalescence effect.
- ❑ *Historic setting* - any adverse impacts on the setting of listed buildings and conservation areas.

Do you consider this list to be comprehensive, or are there other planning issues which arise from applications for polytunnel development which should be addressed?

This paper is intending to spark debate and thus assist in the production of a comprehensive SPD, covering all relevant issues. Therefore please send your comments to the address below in order that they can be considered during the production of the Polytunnels SPD.

### Additional Information

Applicants will be expected to submit a detailed planning application, which will often need to include essential additional submissions such as:

- a landscape impact assessment,
- an economic assessment, and/or
- an environmental impact assessment.

It is within these documents that a detailed assessment of the potential effects of a development will be made. Since the issues are often complex and interlinked, any planning application will be expected to cover all aspects of the development in some depth in order that a determination can be made in light of all relevant facts.

## UDP Key Policies Relating to Polytunnels

The following table shows a list of the UDP policies with direct relevance to most proposals for polytunnel development within the County and outlines examples of issues they cover. There will also be a number of other UDP policies which will be of relevance in certain instances, depending on the individual scheme. For example policies dealing with Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or the protection of designated wildlife sites or archaeological sites. The appropriate UDP policies to be considered will be determined on the facts of each case, however the SPD will provide guidance on the main policy matters which will need to be adequately addressed by a prospective polytunnels developer.



<b>Key UDP Policies</b>	<b>Examples of Issues Addressed through Policies</b>
<b>S1 sustainable development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General sustainability considerations</li> <li>• Protection and enhancement of natural environment and historic heritage</li> <li>• Safeguarding of visual amenity and landscape character</li> <li>• Support for sustainable economic activity and high and stable levels of employment</li> <li>• Support for sustainable approaches to land use and management in rural areas</li> <li>• Avoidance or minimisation of adverse impacts of human activities, land uses and development on the physical environment</li> </ul>
<b>S2 development requirements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring that new development is sustainable and is designed within environmental constraints</li> <li>• Taking a risk-based, precautionary approach to flood risk</li> <li>• Avoiding development with significant negative environmental effects and providing mitigation/ compensation where this is unavoidable</li> <li>• Taking account of existing and proposed infrastructure (e.g. water supply, water resources, highway network)</li> </ul>
<b>DR1 design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting or reinforcing character and appearance of locality in terms of layout, scale, mass etc.</li> <li>• Respecting context of the site</li> <li>• Including measures to address the conservation of energy and water and avoiding nuisance and pollution</li> </ul>
<b>DR2 land use &amp; activity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding prejudice to the amenity or continued use of adjoining land and buildings</li> </ul>

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<b>DR4 environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimising resource use, including water and energy</li> <li>• Safeguarding the availability and quality of surface and groundwater supplies</li> <li>• Avoiding the creation of or exacerbation of flooding or pollution problems</li> <li>• Avoiding adverse effects to other land users, residential amenity or the environment</li> </ul>
<b>DR6 water resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resisting development where there is an unacceptable risk to the availability or quality of water resources</li> </ul>
<b>DR7 flood risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flood risk assessments</li> <li>• Avoiding the unacceptable risk of flooding</li> </ul>
<b>E13 agricultural &amp; forestry development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding adverse impacts on residential amenity and the environment</li> </ul>
<b>NC1 biodiversity &amp; development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consideration of the effects on biodiversity and features of geological interest</li> <li>• Retention of existing wildlife corridors with layout and design</li> <li>• Avoidance of adverse effects on adjacent biodiversity, or proposals which lead to fragmentation, increased isolation or damage to protected habitats or species</li> </ul>



## Ancillary Development

In addition to the erection of the polytunnels themselves, such developments often also involve other ancillary works. It is anticipated that certain associated drainage and irrigation works, for example, are likely to be covered in the SPD. However, larger developments, such as the erection of associated agricultural workers accommodation, will not be incorporated. The latter would be development that is clearly guided by particular national and local planning policies. If there are other minor works associated with polytunnels development that come to light during consultations on the SPD, these may also need to be referred to in the SPD.

## Consultation

If you have any comments on what planning issues should be covered in the Poly tunnels SPD as a result of reading this leaflet, please send them in to the address provided.

In addition, further consultation will take place early in 2008 on the draft SPD document itself, at which stage all comments will be fully considered and changes made to the document where necessary. The final Poly tunnels SPD will then be produced, along with a requisite consultation statement and sustainability appraisal, and subsequently formally adopted. Should you wish to be consulted on the draft Poly tunnels SPD early next year then please could you write, telephone, or e-mail your details to the following address and these will be added to our database for future reference.

## Timetable for Production of SPD

It is anticipated that the draft Poly tunnels SPD will be produced for public consultation for a six-week period in January/February 2008. Following this the SPD will be finalised in March/April, and adopted in May 2008.

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