

Planning Guidance Statement on Polytunnels

(Reviewed 2018)

Large-scale commercial polytunnel installations within, or affecting the setting of, the AONB should be objected to. Similarly, such installations within the Green Belt should also be objected to because of their impact on openness.

There are no unequivocal guidelines for polytunnels, however, so Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) have to apply their own interpretation of the rules on a case-by-case basis and, therefore, may adopt different approaches to planning applications. The presumption in favour of sustainable development and the emphasis on supporting the rural economy contained in the NPPF could have a bearing on the relative weight given to benefits and impacts.

These are some of the factors that have to be taken into consideration:

- 1) whether the planned structure falls within the meaning of 'operational development', i.e. a building depends on the type and scale of the polytunnel based on all material considerations including its dimensions, physical attachment to the ground and degree of permanence ("size, fixing method, permanence").
- 2) whether it is an agricultural permitted development, falling within the limits of what farmers can do under agricultural permitted development rights, in which case it does not require a planning application. Note that even in such circumstances, the local planning authority has some influence on siting and scale.
- 3) if it does require full planning permission, Planning Policies relating to the protection of the AONB, Green Belt, rural character, and neighbouring amenities, may come into play.

Where, and if, (1) and (2) apply, there are no grounds for intervention by the Society/PFO unless, of course, it is arguable that the application falls outside the specified conditions.

Where (3) applies Society/PFO's position should primarily be determined by the objective of avoiding or minimising any detrimental visual or other impacts to the countryside, especially within, or affecting the setting of, the AONB.

In some circumstances proposals can be ameliorated by landscaping, adjustments to siting, or operational conditions; and seeking mitigation of this sort may in some cases be a more viable alternative than outright opposition.

For large scale schemes it is best practice for an applicant to prepare a Whole Farm Plan for the management of the polytunnels and their impact on the landscape. This could include the following –

- Plans to rotate the polytunnels around different fields to limit coverage at any one time
- Identify a percentage of land to be covered at any one time
- Prepare a landscape plan for the whole site to include landscaping plans to mitigate visual impacts, retain important habitats and create unfarmed field margins
- Plans for the removal of the plastic from the tunnels, and where possible the frames, when not in use.
- Sustainable drainage plans to manage surface water runoff
- Proposals for internal lighting and hours of operation. To be minimised wherever possible
- Associated developments such as caravan sites for seasonal workers

In this context the NFU and British Summer Fruits Ltd's joint voluntary code of practice proposes that any plan for siting polytunnels should –

- avoid damaging views by planting hedgerows and trees
- use less luminant plastic to reduce glare
- avoid siting polytunnels within 30 m of residential dwellings
- take steps to reduce surface water run-off
- limit working hours
- prepare landscape impact plan and adopt measures to mitigate visual impact

Where a polytunnel lies within the curtilage of a property, it is treated in the same way as an outbuilding would be. In other words, -

- subject to complying with the limits and conditions on size, siting and use applicable to outbuildings generally, it may be permitted development not needing planning permission.

- outside those limits, planning policies relating to non-PD outbuildings will apply.

Monitoring

In view of the above it is important that Planning Field Officers assist the Local Planning Authority by drawing its attention to any indications and/or observations that the erection of polytunnels is being considered, or is taking place.