

**Change of use from countryside to agricultural to use, erection
of 2 x poly-tunnels and 2 x outbuildings with associated
engineering works including raised ground levels and parking**

Site / Surroundings

The application site is located on the south side of Heath House Lane, within Hedge End. The site is outside the built up area boundary and therefore lies within the countryside, although it sits adjacent the urban edge on its Northern boundary.

The site is not located in a settlement gap, it is also important to note that land immediately east of the site is allocated as a Gypsy and Travellers Site [Policy BU5 of the adopted local plan refers].

Access is provided via a 3.5m gate sited off the back of the pavement from Heath House Lane.

The North, East and South boundary are screened with a mix of tree, planting and wire fencing. Whilst the site is 'open' to the west, this is to private adjoining land and so public views of the site are restricted to glimpses from the north across the site.

The site originally sloped heavily downwards from its entrance at Heath House Lane downwards to the rear (refer to submitted site sections), currently the applicants have carried out preliminary engineering works to level off the upper part of the site to provide a higher level similar to that found on Heath House Lane, with a further raised slope downwards to the meet the original level of the site to the rear.

The wider area forms the southern edge of the main part of Hedge End, although newer development has been constructed beyond Pilands Copse in recent years and so the sprawl of development extends southwards beyond the application site.

Other sites along this south side of Heath House Lane have rearwards built form or development with raised levels of land. The proposal picks up on this and is put forward with a proposed change of use from countryside to form an agricultural unit, with the erection of poly tunnels to support the applicants flower growing and hanging basket business.

Prior to the preliminary groundworks already carried out, the site had a steady slope downwards to the rear, with tree planting covering much of the site. With the exception of trees on the boundary, those found within the centre of the site have been removed to enable the preliminary levelling of ground.

Background

The applicants, Mr and Mrs Kempster are the freehold owners of the application site and apply to Eastleigh Borough Council for the change of use to agricultural to support their successful hanging basket and flower growing business.

Whilst engineering works to alter the ground levels have commenced (March 2023) works have now stopped and no further development is to be carried out until such time the relevant approvals have been secured.

Currently the applicants business is located at a nursery site in Lymington, which is a considerable distance away. The future of that nursery is uncertain and so the applicants bring forward this change of use application for a site which is under their ownership. This will give the business certainty moving forward with its viability along with being geographically closer with the ability to further grow the business and continue with its success.

Proposal

The application proposes three parts:

1. Partial change of use of the site to agricultural use (flower growing).
2. Retrospective proposal for engineering works including raising the level of the existing ground.
3. Erection of 2 x poly-tunnels and 2 x outbuildings.

Assessment

The main considerations are:

The principle of development

The impact on the countryside location

The impact on neighbouring amenity

Highways

The principle of development

The proposal includes a change of use of the land to agricultural use. Policy S5 allows for new development in the countryside provided it is related to;

a. the provision of employment through agricultural development (policy DM17), the extension and replacement of existing employment uses (policy DM18) and the re-use of existing buildings (policy DM19)

In permitting new development in the countryside the Borough Council will seek to:

a. avoid adverse impacts on the rural, woodland, riparian or coastal character, the intrinsic character of the landscape including the avoidance of adverse landscape impacts on areas adjoining national parks and their settings, the significance of heritage assets and on the biodiversity of the area;

b. secure long-term beneficial management practices that will enhance the landscape and biodiversity of the countryside and coast;

c. avoid sterilisation of mineral resources, in accordance with the Hampshire Minerals and Waste Plan;

d. safeguard the best and most versatile agricultural land unless the benefit of the development clearly outweighs the loss; and

e. protect soils during construction wherever possible in line with the 'Defra code of practice for the sustainable use of soils on construction sites'.

The proposal is to ensure the long-term viability of a local business and so is brought forward assessed against policy DM17, the provision of employment. The flower growing and hanging basket business is proving to be successful and so requires a local dedicated site for the growing of flowers along with store room and outbuilding to provide an area for the hanging basket preparation.

Whilst policy S5 restricts development in the countryside principally in order to maintain its rural character, and to limit urbanisation, this particular site is well screened and in its wider context picked up on similar sites in the area.

Given the nature of the proposed use, the land is not 'farmed' but instead low-level poly-tunnels are required in order to successfully grow the flowers. The sites orientation and ground levels allow both excellent levels of sunlight along with shelter from prevailing winds, but also keep the use hidden from public vantage point and so not only does this protect the character of the area, but also provides the site with security.

Whilst the poly-tunnels are ideal for growing flowers, given the hanging baskets require to be designed and made by hand, further outbuildings outside of the heat of the sun are required to provide a suitable area for workers.

The existing rear of the site is to be retained as a 'buffer' to the protected trees that lay beyond. This 18 meter zone is not part of the change of use application and so will remain as countryside to allow the LPA control over its use.

Character and appearance of the area

Whilst engineering works have commenced, these are not complete and additional work is proposed to create two tiers across the site. An upper tier will provide a parking area and level access with a small outbuilding to be used as a staff area. The outbuilding is single storey and with a low pitched roof which is proposed to resemble a small barn, to be clad in timber. This will help the building sit within its surroundings and echo a traditional countryside form.

The use of native, evergreen planting will mitigate any views of the upper level of the site, refer to submitted section drawing, this ensures a 'green' view towards the site.

Gates set back in to the site will include planting (low level to ensure visibility) so soften the appearance of the timber gates.

The lower tier will contain the poly-tunnels for the growing of flowers and further outbuilding for the preparation of the hanging baskets. Due to the topography of the site, the lower tier cannot be viewed from any public vantage point, and so no harm occurs.

Additional planting is proposed as demonstrated to further soften the appearance of the site.

The backdrop of trees to the rear of the site also softens the impact of any proposals.

Amenities

The proposed change of use, outbuildings and poly-tunnels have no adverse impact on neighbouring amenities given the separation distances that exist, the use of the sites topography to conceal form along with the use of additional planting.

No tunnels will be located with 30 m of a residential property, the tunnels are set back circa 30m from Heath House Lane and sit at low level. The growing of flowers produces little noise and no large machinery such as tractors are required.

Highways

The proposed site access is to be reconfigured and set back from the existing position to allow a 5m pass-point. The use of low level planting adjacent the access will allow 2m visibility splays to the pavement, which whilst unlikely to be used save for the bus-stop. This is an improvement over the existing access arrangement.

The proposed use will have an increase in traffic over the existing, however with the improved access and provision of sight-lines, it is not considered harmful.

The proposal shows space for 4 cars along with turning on site to enter and leave in a forward gear.

The applicant has stated that the business has no visiting customers and so trip rates are low and will relate to workers only. The business operates seasonally (around 6 months of the year), with the bulk of work between March and June and then again between September and October.

Staff numbers are currently envisaged at a total of 3 including the applicant at the peak times of making the hanging baskets.

The proposed outbuilding will include an internal area suitable for the secure storage of cycles to encourage the use of sustainable means of transport for staff.

Justification

The applicants business 'Blooming Lovely' is a successful family run award winning business which makes and supplies hanging baskets for private customers and businesses across the south coast.

The business has been running for 20 years and continues to thrive, supplying private clients for houses and functions along with many businesses including Eastleigh Borough Council with displays throughout the year.

Currently the business is located at Northfield Nursery in Pennington, Lymington where there is uncertainty over the long term future of the leased unit and so understandably the applicant as the business owner wishes to relocate to a local and secure site.

The applicants grow flowers and plants for use in hanging baskets and displays, which are put together on site, and then distributed by the business directly.

The business is not a service centre where members of the public visit the premises, all public contact is made via a website, telephone and social media pages.

The business is financially stable and the applicant wishes to invest further after the purchase of the land.

With much of the trade for the company being local businesses with repeat orders each season, 'Blooming Lovely' looks to grow further and so the need for a secure premises is now very important.

The site at Heath House Lane has a good aspect, with plentiful hours of sunlight and so lends itself for the growing of flowers. With a more local premises central to the areas of client coverage, the business can operate in a more efficient sustainable manor with reduced travel distance.

Access

As noted above, the existing access point from the highway is to be utilised, however this is to be widened as shown to improve visibility and allow a pass-point.

It is not proposed that members of the public will visit the site.

Design / Scale

The outbuildings are of single storey height with low pitched roof and to be clad in timber, this is typical of buildings within a countryside setting and so considered suitable.

The poly-tunnels are of typical design with 50mm steel framework covered with a thermal anti drip polythene cover. Timber framed doors provide access in to the poly-tunnel.

The tunnels are commercial and a standard 21 feet wide, this allows good air circulation. The tunnels are installed on to mud and will have a gravel pathway around.

Refuse

Given the nature of the business, waste produced is re-used and so very little waste is produced. Any items that are not recycled on the site will be taken kerbside (behind low level planting) at the site access point on collection days.

Again, given the seasonal nature of the business and fact that little waste is produced, the applicant would accept a private refuse service.

Ecology

No buildings, nor areas of high level habitat exist on site and the proposal therefore causes no harm. No external lighting is proposed. Areas of additional native planting and tree planting is proposed to encourage wildlife.

No pesticides are used.

The applicant would accept a suitably worded condition relating to providing details of additional biodiversity measures.

Trees

Referring to the existing and proposed site plans, the proposed works only involve a non-dig, non-permeable driveway close to 3 large trees at the front (north side) of the site.

Additional trees are proposed to be planted as part of the compressive proposal.

The closest protected trees are to the south (TPO 143-E) and an 18 meter buffer is proposed to any works to the ground level, with built form further away still.

Irrigation

The site is to be served by a water supply. An area of the site adjacent the poly-tunnels is to be utilised as a rainwater harvesting area.

Each plant will be irrigated via a drip irrigation system to provide the correct amount of water to produce the optimum yield. Drip irrigation is the most efficient method of irrigation. It reduces the amount of water used, in comparison to spray irrigation and reduces the volume of water required and the amount of run off.

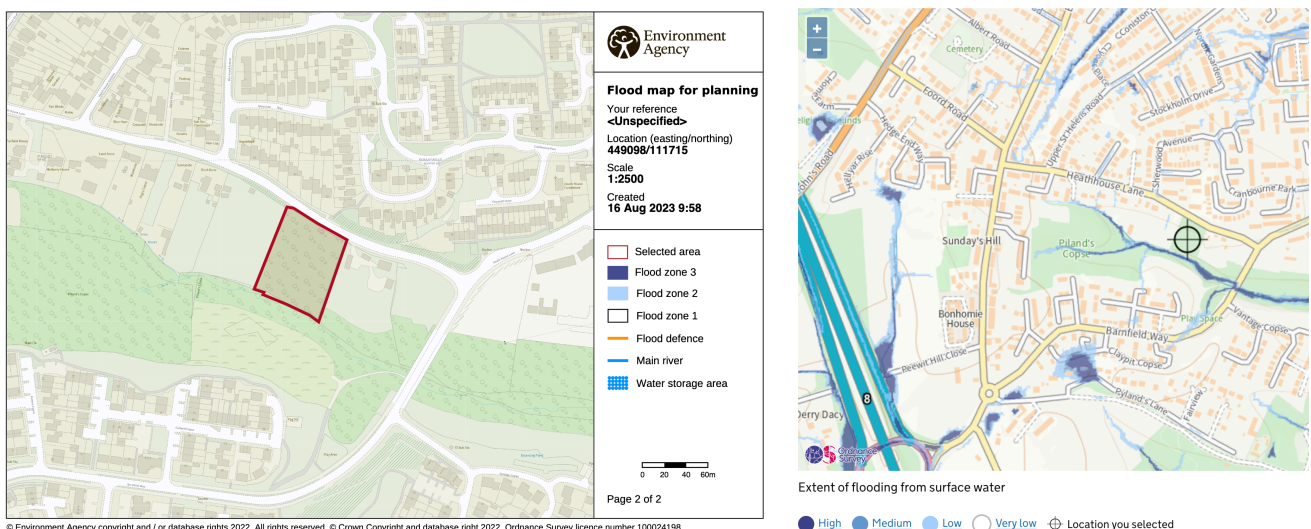
Flooding

The site is located in flood zone 1, the lowest category and as the site is less than 1 hectare, no Flood Risk Assessment is required.

In addition, the proposal for a use such as flower growing will re-use any additional surface water created, the sites topography is also helpful in creating areas of water storage and rain water harvesting. A rain water harvesting tank system is to be located adjacent the poly-tunnels, specification details are not yet known.

An existing watercourse to the south exists; EA mapping shows this to be used in event of surface water flooding, therefore it is important that any development on the application site does not increase the risk of surface water run off.

The use of water butts and a rain water harvesting tank system will ensure any surface water is stored and re-used rather than running off into the existing ground.



NPPF

The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development as stated in paragraph 7 of the NPPF. Achieving sustainable development has three main objectives, an economic objective, a social objective and an environmental objective.

Paragraph 81 of the NPPF states that a planning policy decision should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and deduct. Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both the local businesses needs and the wider opportunity for development.

Paragraph 84 states planning policy and decisions should enable the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of businesses in rural areas, both for the conversion of existing buildings and well-designed new buildings, and the development and diversification of agriculture and other land based rural businesses.

Paragraph 85 states that planning policy decisions should recognise that sites need to meet local business and community needs. Rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond the existing settlements and in locations that are not well serviced by private transport. In these circumstances, it is important to ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and it spoils any opportunities to make the location more sustainable. The use of previously developed land on sites that are physically well related to existing settlements should be encouraged where suitable opportunities exist.

The proposed change of use and poly-tunnels support a sustained growth of 'Blooming Lovely' business and the tunnels have been designed to fulfil their function and to increase the yield of flowers produced on that land. The business has developed and diversified to be an award winning supplier of hanging baskets.

Poly-Tunnel Code of Practice

A Code of Practice has been established by DEFRA which states that: -

1. Polytunnels must not be sited within 30 m of the boundary of the nearest residential property unless as a result of prior agreement with neighbours concerned. Polytunnels may be located closer to residential dwellings if they are not obstructing the view from the dwelling concerned or after consultation with the residents. All reasonable practical steps must be taken to minimise noise when working close to the neighbour's house, either early in the morning before 7 am or late in the evening after 8 pm.

No tunnels will be located with 30 m of a residential property. Noise will be kept to a minimum outside of these hours. The growing of flowers produces little noise and no large machinery such as tractors are required.

2. Steps should be taken to effectively manage run off from polytunnels and where possible polytunnels should be sited to reduce the impact of run-off.

The surface water will be collected and transferred to the harvesting tank for irrigation.

3. All reasonable steps must be taken using trees and hedgerow planting to minimise the visual impact of polytunnels from the immediate view of neighbours' residential dwellings.

The site is well screened by existing hedges and trees, additional landscaping is to be planted.

4. Where possible growers should consider less luminant types of polythene to reduce visual glare.

The type of opaque plastic is chosen for its ability to let light through to enhance growth and for a strong plastic to stop ripping.

5. Loose polythene should be secured for noise nuisance, particularly when close to neighbouring dwellings.

All damaged plastic is replaced wherever necessary and recycled.

6. The polythene cover over frames must be removed for a minimum period of 6 months in any calendar year.

This condition cannot be complied with. The DEFRA Guide to Polytunnels is now 16 years old and techniques and growing methods have advanced. To generate the yields required to be viable, the plants need to be covered for much of the year.

7. Growers must store unused polythene away from public view.

All polythene will be stored in the outbuildings buildings on the site. Any waste plastic is recycled. Any existing sheeting is carefully rolled up and secured into the loops.

8. Growers must remove polythene from hoops within one month of completing cropping unless it would cause damage to the soil or plants because of poor weather conditions.

If the tunnels are not protecting plants, the plastic will be removed within one month.

9. Waste polythene must be removed and recycled in an approved manner.

All waste plastic is baled and recycled. Any plastic plant pots are recycled.

10. Records shall be kept of the following: -

- i. The type of crops and whether grown in ground bags, in bags or off the ground*
- ii. The date when frameworks and polythene covers are to be erected and expected, date of removal of polythene covers.*
- iii. The area and percentage of total area of the farm to be covered in polytunnels.*
- iv. A record of any Notices given including to the neighbours' residential dwellings before work commences.*

All records kept and available to the council on request.