

# Need for polytunnel policy agreed

AN application covering 57 acres of open Medway Valley countryside has prompted Maidstone Council to produce planning guidelines on polytunnels throughout the borough.

The planning committee was urged by officers to grant permission for a part-retrospective application for blocks of polytunnels, each measuring 6m wide, in Marshalls Farm, Hunt Street, West Farleigh. Polytunnels already exist in the borough, but are mostly smaller in size and in more secluded locations. There is also a question mark over whether permission is always required for plastic-coated polytunnels.

So members, mindful of the possible long-term consequences, deferred the application to allow a study to take place. Cllr Richard Lusty, chairman of the planning committee, said after the meeting: "It was deferred because there was a much wider consideration over polytunnels and how they affect the landscape.

"I wanted to get information from the National Farmers Union and other wider interested parties. The decision that we make on this plan will affect the whole of the borough."



Applicant Robert Pascall, of Coxheath-based fruit growers Clock House Farm Ltd, argued the polytunnels were crucial to enable his company to compete with foreign imports. He said: "None of our customers will purchase soft fruit not protected from the weather. The polytunnels are just rain covers – there is no question about damage to flora and fauna." He added that the tunnels, which were used during the summer, would only be erected during the growing season – less than 50% of the year – and be subject to rotation.

Members of four parish councils – West Farleigh, Teston, Coxheath and Barming – verbally challenged the proposal. Coxheath

member Brian Mortimer said: "Located on a slope, these polytunnels will be seen in Teston, Barming, both Farleighs and Watringbury. This will totally change the countryside and the harm totally outweighs the agricultural need.

"I live opposite polytunnels in Heath Road but because they are surrounded by woods and not in open countryside it is acceptable."

The application is Maidstone's much smaller equivalent to a plan being studied by neighbouring Tonbridge and Malling Council for Hugh Lowe Farms' proposed construction of an unprecedented 432 acres of tunnels in Barons Place Farm, Seven Mile Lane, Mereworth. It led to Lib Dem councillor Trudy Dean calling for KCC to set up polytunnel guidance for borough councils.

Maidstone committee member Cllr Tony Harwood said: "This is the beginning of a trend. We will start to see these types of applications throughout Maidstone.

"We need to get our policy right on polytunnels. If not, we will end up with things wrapped in plastic throughout the countryside rather than sustainable designs."