

West Sussex Growers' Association

8th March 2023

Chichester District Council – Local Plan – Submission to Consultation

Horticultural Development Areas (HDAs)

1. Background

The Government has tasked Growers to grow more home grown produce, increase productivity, reduce food miles and the UK's reliance on imported food. There is also an increasing need for space to grow plants, shrubs and trees. These aims can be achieved; however, the Horticultural and Food Industries need Local Planning Policies to be in place that enables sustainable development. To this end, more flexibility is needed in the current CDC Local Plan - Horticultural Policy to meet the needs of the Horticultural sector.

Over the coming years, more provision of space for nurseries, high-tech glasshouses, packhouses and reservoirs will be required; however, there will also be an increased need for ancillary development, such as: Vertical Farming Projects, Research & Development Facilities, Alternative Energy Centres, Logistics and Distribution Centres, Engineering and Technical Support Facilities.

The West Sussex Coastal Plain, with its exceptionally high winter light levels and all year round beneficial climate, is the preferred location for horticultural production in the UK.

The Horticultural Industry, concentrated around Chichester and Bognor Regis, generates annual turnover that exceeds £1billion pounds and employs more than 10,000 full time equivalent staff.

The workforce includes many high value jobs, such as: Growing & Technical Managers, Sales & Marketing Teams, IT, Engineering and Logistics specialists, HR, Accounts, Administration and Office Staff, as well as Team Leaders, Supervisors and Skilled Operational Staff.

Chichester District Council first defined Horticultural Development Areas (HDAs) in the mid-1990's and apart from minor changes to the areas themselves (Runcton, Tangmere and Sidlesham) and the wording of the HDA Policy; nothing much has changed over the intervening years.

However, the Horticultural Industry itself has changed enormously over the same time period, year on year becoming more high-tech, intensive and diverse, with huge investments made into alternative energy systems, rain water harvesting schemes, automation and robotics.

2. High-Tech Glasshouses and Multispan Polythene Greenhouses

High-tech glasshouses and multispan polythene greenhouses will continue to be key to the production of many horticultural crops in the Chichester area. For the foreseeable future, and

specifically taking into account the Government's policy to increase home produced food, plants and trees and to reduce our reliance on imports, more land will need to be set aside for nursery and greenhouse development.

The advent of more innovation, automation and robotics in the horticultural industry will lead to increased productivity; however, the need for large numbers of staff with skills at all levels will continue.

3. Vertical Farming

For certain types of crops, vertical farming is becoming increasingly viable. The horticultural crops that are best suited to vertical farming are: young plant propagation (plugs and seedlings), leafy salads, lettuce, herbs and certain other short and compact plants. A few other crops (short and compact) such as strawberries and ornamental bedding plants can also be produced this way. Some pharmaceutical crops can also be grown in a vertical farming facility. Classic glasshouse crops such as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and aubergines cannot be grown economically this way as they are too tall, heavy and take up far too much room.

For the crops suited to vertical farming systems, pro-rata, a far smaller footprint is required as trays of plants can be stacked at height on shelving systems. LED lighting, irrigation and automated handling equipment can be incorporated within these stacked shelf systems.

Vertical farming units are by definition vertical growing systems rather than the traditional horizontal growing systems seen in conventional glasshouses; however, the fundamental requirements are exactly the same, as the photosynthesis of plants requires the same inputs, i.e: light, water, nutrients, oxygen, carbon dioxide and a controlled environment.

The buildings required to house vertical farming systems are quite different to traditional glasshouses or multispan polythene greenhouses. A far smaller footprint is required than that used to grow the equivalent number of plants in a conventional greenhouse. A typical vertical farming building is a completely closed and heavily insulated structure with a fully controlled internal environment. Due to the closed and insulated structure, the heat energy requirement is much reduced.

Hybrid growing is also very successful; that is to say, where vertical farming systems are installed inside conventional high-tech glasshouses. This obviously does not reduce the overall footprint of the glasshouse area, but with the installation of vertically stacked platforms, it increases the growing area and productivity.

Vertical farming facilities are also ideal for research and development work, e.g., for plant breeding and environmental, climate change, net zero carbon and pest and disease research.

4. Logistics & Distribution

Packhouses, warehouses, cold stores, logistics, transport and distribution services linked directly to local areas of production are essential. Over 90% of all horticultural crops grown in the

Chichester area are distributed to supermarkets, retailers and the food service industry throughout the UK. All of these ancillary services need to be at the centre of horticultural production and should ideally be situated within the designated HDAs.

5. Alternative Energy Centres

Many of our local horticultural businesses have invested heavily into alternative energy systems; including: Combined Heat & Power (CHP), providing electricity to the National Grid and heat and CO₂ for glasshouse crops, Anaerobic Digestors (AD), providing methane to power CHPs that provide electricity to the National Grid and many Biomass installations that consume woodchip as fuel instead of gas or oil to heat greenhouses.

These installations are all ancillary to horticultural production but need to be adjacent to greenhouses, packhouses and cold stores in the HDAs and nurseries where the energy is required.

6. Engineering & Technical Support Facilities

The majority of horticultural businesses in the Chichester area are highly sophisticated and have made massive investments in automation and technical equipment in recent years. There is an increasing need for high-tech ancillary services to support the horticultural sector: engineering, technology, automation, robotics, AI, IT and many other specialist requirements.

7. Staff Accommodation

Over the last five years the horticultural industry has seen a chronic shortage of workers at all skills levels. This has been a major problem locally due to the very high accommodation and transport costs in the Chichester area.

Providing new, purpose built staff accommodation facilities on site can solve many of these problems. On site accommodation for workers would attract many people who would otherwise not be able to afford to rent rooms in the wider Chichester area (Havant, Selsey, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) and would also drastically reduce their transport costs.

8. Inward Investment and Economic Benefit

As the Horticultural Industry is the largest industry in the Chichester area; enabling and widening ancillary development to support horticultural businesses within HDAs would attract much needed inward investment to the area and deliver substantial economic benefit.

It is accepted that, due to the current limitations as to access, the HDAs at Sidlesham and Batchmere are more suited to small to medium sized horticultural development