

APPENDIX F

HOUSE OF LORDS

The Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: To ask Her Majesty's Government, what is their policy on the spacing of motorway service areas and if they will make a statement.

THE LORD WHITTY

Motorway service areas (MSAs) exist to meet a road safety need by giving drivers somewhere to stop and rest. It is nevertheless important to strike a balance between the needs of motorists and the protection of the countryside from unnecessary development.

Policy on MSAs was last set out by the previous administration in Annex A to PPG13 and Roads Circular 1/94. In summary, MSAs were to be not more than around thirty miles apart and, to increase competition and choice, could be provided as frequently as about every fifteen miles.

Some six years after its introduction, there is little evidence of new operators entering the MSA sector. I am, however, concerned that additional MSA provision has been at the expense of other considerations, particularly in areas of planning restraint. We therefore intend to return to a policy based on the provision of MSAs approximately every thirty miles in order to provide drivers with adequate opportunities to stop and rest. Services at closer intervals will not be ruled out completely but we will in future expect to approve them only where there are exceptional need and safety grounds for doing so.

I am today issuing detailed guidance on this and a number of related MSA matters. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. This new advice will take effect immediately and we will expect developers, planners and others to take account of it when considering proposals for new MSAs. Where it differs from previous statements of policy, the new guidance should be regarded as taking precedence. It will be incorporated in a consolidated circular on MSA policy in due course.

MSA POLICY STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

1. This statement supplements Roads Circular 1/94 and PPG13 (March 1994) pending the full revision of both those documents. Aspects of MSA policy covered there which are not touched on in this statement (principally much of the sections in the Circular on Parking, Other Requirements and Access to Motorways) therefore continue to apply.

SPACING AND NEED

2. MSA spacing policy aims to balance two conflicting considerations, both safety-related. On the one hand there are the road safety benefits of allowing drivers frequent access to services. On the other, MSAs introduce new on- and off-motorway movements which have implications of their own for safety and the free flow of traffic. Safety considerations aside, there is also a need on wider policy grounds to limit development alongside motorways and motorway junctions. This applies particularly, though not exclusively, to open countryside and areas of planning restraint such as National Parks, AONBs, the Green Belt and sites which either are themselves, or may affect, SSSIs.

3. The consistent view over many years was that an acceptable balance between these conflicting pressures could be struck by securing a network of MSAs at roughly thirty mile intervals. Motorists would then have an opportunity to stop and rest approximately every half an hour assuming normal motorway speeds. More recently however, and in an effort to increase competition and choice, policy has allowed that basic "thirty mile" network to be supplemented by infill MSAs at intervals of around fifteen miles.

4. That policy change generated a large number of MSA planning applications but has had limited success in encouraging new operators to enter the MSA sector. For the future therefore the Government wishes to concentrate on completion of the "thirty mile" MSA network on those relatively few stretches of motorway where this has not already been achieved. This does not amount to a presumption in favour of MSA proposals which would contribute to the "thirty mile" network; they will continue to be subject to the normal operation of the land use planning system. Planning authorities will, however, be expected to give greater weight to the needs of motorists in these cases.

5. Planning permission for infill MSAs between "thirty mile" sites should be granted only exceptionally and where a clear and compelling need and safety case for the MSA has been established. Individual cases will need to be treated on their merits and it is not possible to prescribe a comprehensive list of the factors which it might be appropriate to consider in every case. There are, nevertheless a number which are likely to be of importance in virtually all cases. Planning authorities will therefore be expected to have considered at least :-

- the distance to adjoining MSAs;

- evidence (such as queuing on the MSA approach roads or lack of parking spaces at times of peak demand) that nearby existing MSAs are unable to cope with the need for services;

- a higher than normal incidence of accidents attributable to driver fatigue;

- evidence of a genuine need for the proposed services rather than simply demand: it will not be sufficient to show merely that drivers would use an MSA if it were to be built - there should be evidence of a genuine safety-related need;

- whether the MSA is justified by the type and nature of the traffic using the road; the need for services may, for example, be less on motorways used by high percentages of short distance or commuter traffic than on those carrying large volumes of long distance movements.

6. Where infill sites are proposed, the Government's preference will be that they should be located roughly half way between existing services. It will not, however, insist on this if it can be shown that an off-centre location is superior to a more central one in either general planning terms or in its ability to meet a particular and significant need. The Government will not, in any case, agree to more than one infill site between any two "thirty mile" MSAs.

7. The M25 is unique by virtue, among other things, of the volume of traffic it carries, the frequency of its junctions and its location in the Green Belt. It may not therefore be appropriate to apply general MSA policy in unmodified form to the M25, and in particular to its western half. There have already been a number of public inquiries into MSA proposals to serve this part of the M25 and another is due shortly. The Government intends therefore to leave open whether there should be one or two MSAs on the roughly sixty mile stretch of the M25(W) between South Mimms and Clacket Lane until all the relevant Inspectors' reports have been received.

RETAIL AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT AT MSAs

8. Long-standing policy is that MSAs should provide only facilities needed to serve those using the motorway in the course of a journey and should not become destinations in their own right. This has meant that overnight lodges and a modest degree of retail development have been regarded as falling within the scope of what could legitimately be provided at MSAs but that full scale hotels and extensive shopping and conference facilities have not. The Government remains committed to the principle of preventing MSAs from becoming destinations but is concerned that, in the absence of any clear guidelines, developments within some MSAs have moved close to the acceptable limits.

9. In future, therefore, the Government will not approve, and will not allow signing from the motorway to, any MSA which, in addition to the compulsory MSA facilities, provides anything beyond :-

- a lodge which may provide overnight accommodation and a modest meeting room for up to fifteen people, but not a bar, restaurants, function rooms or more extensive conference facilities;

- a shop or shops catering for those using the motorway and with a total floor area not exceeding 5000 sq ft;

- a modest games/leisure area not exceeding 1000 sq ft.

It is not intended that these restrictions should prevent the establishment within MSAs of a range of alternative catering outlets which would increase the choice available to those using MSAs in the course of their journeys.

DESIGN STANDARDS

10. The Government believes that good design should be the aim of all those involved in the development process. Those promoting MSA schemes will therefore be expected to demonstrate that they have taken account of the need for high standards of design in formulating their proposals.

11. In design terms, MSA schemes should :-

- respond sensitively to both the site and its setting, including the existing landscape and other physical features, and take account of the purposes of any designation which may cover the site or the surrounding area; create character and identity within the site by the careful design of spaces and buildings and the relationship between them; and minimise the visual impact of the development on its surroundings;

- incorporate vehicle accesses and means of circulation which are safe, clear to motorists and minimise vehicle congestion: with this in mind, developers will be required to apply the relevant Highways Agency technical standards when designing MSA accesses and internal layouts; to submit the resulting proposals for processing through the Agency's formal road safety audit procedures; and to ensure that signing for drivers using the site complies with the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions;

- achieve building designs which take account of the needs of users, including those of disabled people;

- incorporate buildings which are safe, environmentally friendly and energy efficient so as to minimise environmental damage and waste; and,

- ensure the sensitive design and siting of lighting schemes with the aim of minimising light pollution whilst ensuring that public areas are well lit.